

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a bright yellow-orange semi-circle on the horizon, partially covered by dark, horizontal clouds. The sky above is a deep, dark orange. The water in the foreground is dark and textured.

DEEP TROUBLE

MARK HILL

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CHAPTER 1

Sharkey Drysdale had the three Australians hanging on his every word.

"Look at the quality of this piece," he said, passing around a color photograph of a centuries-old Indian necklace that he'd carefully razored from a public library copy of Treasures of the Maya.

"Genuine Aztec. I took this picture myself. The gold alone is worth thousands. And there's tons of the stuff down there."

"Where?" the Aussies asked in unison.

"Right here," Sharkey said, holding up another photo, this one showing three huge stone pyramids. "Gentlemen, feast your eyes on the ancient Aztec capital of Palenque, deep in the heart of modern Mexico."

Wide-eyed, the Aussies gasped. If it is at all possible to sweat greed, the stuff seemed to be pouring out of these guys. Until then, I'd always thought "goldlust" was the stuff of cheesy pirate movies and juvenile adventure novels. Not any more. The three men on my boat were drowning in it.

I didn't have the heart to tell them that the Aztecs made their capital at Tenochtitlan, not Palenque. Nor did I bother to mention that Sharkey's lovely photograph of Palenque was actually the Mayan city of Tikal, which sits, not in Mexico, but deep in the heart of modern Guatemala.

When Sharkey's on a roll, the truth gets left behind.

#

I've known Sharkey Drysdale for nearly four years now. When I

moved out here and set myself up in the sailboat cruising business, he was my first customer. It was a day cruise. Nothing fancy, but it went well enough, which is to say I didn't actually run the boat aground. And Sharkey seemed pleased, though that likely had less to do with my sailing prowess and more to do with his ability to convince two French millionaires to buy a controlling interest in the Statue of Liberty.

Since then, nothing much has changed. I'm still trying to eke out a living as owner, operator and jack-of-all-trades aboard NewsHound, the sleekest forty-footer outside of the America's Cup. And Sharkey's still the Florida Panhandle's most lovable con-man and one of my most loyal customers.

He's not a handsome fellow. Can't be more than five foot zip in heels with a tailwind. And with his Herb Tarlek wardrobe, beady black eyes and car salesman hairdo, he doesn't exactly inspire confidence. But when Sharkey opens his mouth and launches into an impassioned description of his scam-of-the-month, his eyes light up like the Kohinoor diamond, his voice turns lounge singer-soft and a gentle warmth settles over the air around him.

I'm as cynical as the next guy, but put me in a room with Sharkey for half an hour and, pretty soon, I'm reaching for my check book.

Every three or four months, Sharkey turns up on my boat with a fresh batch of fools for fleecing. I have no idea where he finds them. There must be a tiny village somewhere filled with gullible millionaires. How else does one explain the four Italians who each paid him \$250,000 for the rights to develop Dante's Inferno as a made-for-TV movie? Or the two guys from California who forked over \$300,000 for what they believed to be the source code for Windows 98, but turned out to be three floppy disks worth of pornographic downloads from the Playboy website?

But for sheer idiocy, nothing beats the Texas oilman who paid nearly half a million bucks for what purported to be North Korea's secret war plans. The guy was halfway to Asia, hoping to sell them to the South Koreans, when a friendly airline stewardess translated the documents and suggested that the Republic of Korea's department of defense was probably not going to be interested in a carefully copied edition of the House of Seoul Restaurant's dinner menu.

Today's group were no dumber, but certainly no brighter, than Sharkey's usual crowd. Three beefy guys dressed (oddly for a day on a sailboat) in nearly identical shiny black suits, they spent most of the voyage holding on for dear life whenever NewsHound keeled more than four degrees over. Landlubbers the lot of them, they didn't seem capable of taking three steps without tripping over each other or the green canvas duffel bag they'd brought aboard, but never opened.

They didn't look like Aussies at all. I'd first figured them for New Jersey mobsters or Sly Stallone's bodyguards. But from the first "Giddyoy moyt," it was clear they weren't long out of kangaroo and koala country. That plus the fact that they pronounced my name "Fahhlur" when they weren't calling me "sport", said "cheers" instead of "thank you" and referred to NewsHound as a "soil-bout", left little doubt where they were from.

Right now, they were drooling like dogs in heat over Sharkey's scheme to make them rich beyond dreams of avarice. The little grifter had them well and truly hooked and was now pulling back a bit to give the suckers time to sell themselves on the deal.

"So how do we get inside those pyramids, eh?" said the Aussie with the widest shoulders and the least neck. "And how do you figure we get the stuff out?"

"All in good time," Sharkey said, with a wry grin. "All in good time. Right now, I'm more interested in seeing what Captain Fowler has prepared for our lunch."

Sharkey only ever calls me Captain Fowler in front of his victims. He reckons it adds a jaunty nautical air to the proceedings. The rest of the time he calls me Rex, like everybody else (except my mother back in Montana who generally refers to me as "he who rarely visits"). Still, at \$350 a day plus tax and fuel, Sharkey can call me whatever the hell he likes.

"Won't be more than a few minutes now, Sharkey," I said, turning down the flame on the small propane barbecue fastened to the quarter-deck. "Why don't you crack open fresh beers for our guests? Plenty of cold Heineken in the cooler."

"Go easy on the Sharkeys, will ya Rex," Sharkey said, sidling over out of the Australians' earshot.

"Your name no good anymore?"

"I'm using my middle name today," he said. "Ricardo."

"Since when is Ricardo your middle name?" I asked.

"Since today. And it's not 'Rick-are-doe'. You sound like a white man."

"I am a white man. And in case you've forgotten, so are you."

"Just give it a bit of a Spanish twist," he said. "Reek-aahh-doe. Say it like that. Reek-aahh-doe. Roll the 'R' a bit, okay?"

"Reek-aahh-doe?"

"Yeah," Sharkey said. "Gotta get that Mayan feeling happening."

"Mayan?" I said. "You mean Aztec, don't you, Sharkey?"

"Ricardo."

"Whatever."

#

Lunch, as always, went over well. I'm no great shakes as a cook, but you can't go wrong with shrimp, steaks, salad and lots of ice-cold imported beer. By the time I shut down the barbecue, poured myself an orange juice, grabbed a plate of food and sat down with my guests, they were all a bit looped.

"NewsHound," one of the Aussies said with a disapproving slur. He was clearly one of those guys who thought all boats should be called Wet Dream or Hole in the Water. "What kind of a name is that?"

"Before he took to the high seas," Sharkey answered, knocking over his beer with a backhand wave of his hand, "our Captain Fowler used to be a journalist."

"That's right," I said, launching into an oft-told story.

Clients who pay big bucks for a day's sailing always want to know how I manage to do it for a living. So I end up telling them how I worked hard as an intrepid newsman, scrimping and saving my pennies, until one day I had enough put away to realize my life-long dream of buying a boat and running a tour outfit. It's a romantic tale and, like they say on those TV movies, loosely based on a true story.

Truth is, I've sailed all my life, but I never thought about doing it for a living until I found myself out of work, washed up in Boxley Cove, and drinking my way through the hundred grand I'd been paid to quit my reporting job at the Panhandle Times-Register.

There was a time when a second-rate paper like the T-R would have jumped through hoops to get its claws into a hot young police-beat reporter like Rex Fowler. Those were the days when I'd happily crawl out of bed at three a.m. to hit a crime scene, spend the day tracking down the inside story and pound out 800 gripping words by deadline.

For five years, I was hot stuff. I came and went when I liked and if I didn't show up for a week, then so be it. I wrote what I liked, when I liked, and nobody touched my copy. In summertime, I had my pick of the pretty young interns who'd heard on the jungle telegraph how fucking Fowler helped improve your writing.

It was, all in all, a great life.

But, as Woody Allen says, sooner or later everything turns to shit, and it wasn't long before Rex Fowler ace reporter hopped on the long, slow slide to becoming Rex Fowler newsroom drunk.

The Miami Journal fired me over my drinking. I remember when the Managing Editor hauled me into his office and told me I was getting the sack.

"You're just a god-damned drunk, Fowler," he said. "You're no good to this paper."

"I don't think my private life is any business of yours," I said, in a last-ditch effort to save my job. "What I do on my own time ..."

"It's not your own time," he said. "It's our time. For heaven's sake, Rex. The other writers are starting to complain about the sound of empty bottles clinking around your desk drawers. It's just got way out of hand."

I offered to switch to quieter plastic bottles, but they booted me anyway.

Two or three jobs later, I moved to the St. Petersburg Citizen and did quite well until the day I arrived drunk at a murder scene and announced my presence by parking my nine-year-old uninsured Honda four feet into the back of a brand-new squad car. After that, I tried for a job in Tampa, but turned up for the interview cross-eyed, stinking of stale rum and singing the theme song from Welcome Back Kotter. So I ended up working for a weekly tabloid in Gainesville. That lasted less than a year and, once again racing north just ahead of my gin-soaked reputation, I signed onto the Panhandle Times-Register.

The T-R is a lousy paper, but the folks who owned it gave me every possible break and then some. I'd go weeks without showing up for work then spend half the day sitting at my desk, head in hands, staring at a blank screen. I wrote next to nothing and what I did crank out was all crap. The supply of pretty young interns dried up like a dead snake in the desert.

Eventually the paper was sold to one of those multimedia conglomerates, a brand new management team was parachuted in, cutbacks were announced and my name ended up front and center on the chopping list. Thanks to a pretty decent union contract I walked out with a hefty buyout check, which I immediately set out to drink away.

I can't say how or why I managed eventually to sober up. I wish I had some heartwarming story about a beautiful young woman or a kindly old uncle who took pity on me, dried me out and set me on the straight and narrow, but I don't.

I couldn't be bothered with Alcoholics Anonymous either. All that public speaking and denouncing yourself as a complete loser isn't for me. AA works like a charm for many people (and in some cities it's the best spot in town to meet women), but I'd rather be a drunk.

The day I quit, I was sitting on my couch, pissed out of my gills, watching "mothers who steal their daughter's boyfriends" on Jerry Springer, when I stood up, lurched into the bathroom, stared at the broken man in the mirror and said to myself, "Fowler, you're pathetic."

I vomited three times in the bathtub, once in my laundry hamper and I haven't touched a drop since.

#

My customers, on the other hand, were knocking back the booze like it was going to be declared illegal in the morning.

Sharkey (sorry, Reek-aahh-doe) was spinning some fanciful yarn about an ancient Aztec city, filled with gold, guarded by a garrison of heavily armed Mexican soldiers. Sharkey claimed to have worked out an arrangement to bribe the garrison commander. For a quarter of a million dollars cash, Sharkey said, el-commandante (hard to say that with a straight face) would withdraw his troops for twenty-four hours, long enough for Sharkey and company to loot the pyramids and make their escape.

It sounds like a ridiculous tale and it is, but Sharkey is nothing if not persuasive. Those Sunday morning TV evangelists could learn a thing or two about lying with confidence from old Reek-aahh-doe. If I hadn't heard him pitch the same scam a dozen times before, I'd have considered tossing in a few bucks myself.

As it was, I decided to go below and mix up what is, in my humble opinion, the best coffee in the State of Florida. I may not be the best sailor on the Panhandle, but I brew up the finest Irish Coffee outside the Emerald Isle, bar none. The combination of strong espresso (from a second-hand, barely functional Gaggia machine I picked up for a song at a flea market and installed below deck), a liberal lacing of Bushmills and the sight of the fading sun as NewsHound heads back to Boxley Cove is a potent mixture. I don't drink it myself, you understand, but my customers go crazy over the stuff.

"Be up in a few minutes, Reek-aahh-doe," I said, broadly. "Keep an eye out for other boats."

Sharkey nodded absently and went back to his tale. I went below.

#

"Coffee, a la NewsHound," I announced with a flourish as I popped my head out of the hatch clutching a silver tray and four tall, cut-glass coffee mugs.

Each of the three Aussies took a mug and began slurping the thick foam off the top. I picked up the last mug and looked around for Sharkey. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Where'd he go?" I said.

"Who?" the three Australians answered.

"Sharkey," I said. "Sharkey? Reek-aahh-doe?"

"Don't know who you're talking about," one of the men said.

"There's just the three of us here."

"I'm talking about Sharkey Drysdale," I said, sounding, frankly,

like a madman. "The little con-man who brought you on this boat."

"Never heard of him," said another. "Sorry."

"He was just here. Not twenty minutes ago."

"No idea who you're talking about."

We continued in that manner for a good fifteen minutes, until I realized that no amount of indignant huffing and puffing was going to make those the thugs admit they'd ever seen or heard of Sharkey Drysdale. Like a kid who gets caught with his hand in the cookie jar, yet refuses to admit to being a thief, they kept insisting the little guy had never been on the boat. It was maddening as hell, but there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

"It's getting late, Mr. Fowler," one of the men said. "Why don't you take us back to Boxley Cove and we'll call it a day."

I protested some more, but there was really nothing I could do.

I searched the boat from bow to stern, but Sharkey Drysdale was nowhere to be found. The mysterious green canvas duffel bag had disappeared as well.

#

I wish I could say that I hauled out my handgun, held the three Aussies at bay, sailed back to Boxley Cove and turned them over to the cops who charged them with the premeditated murder of my good buddy Sharkey Drysdale.

Unfortunately, I can't do that.

Fact is, I sailed NewsHound as quick as I could back to Boxley Cove and thanked my lucky stars the three muscle-bound thugs didn't kill me as well. Call me a coward, but there wasn't much else to do.

We pulled in to the pier a little before 6 p.m., just as the sun was setting. Normally, a Florida Panhandle sunset fills me with a sense of romance and well-being. This time, it was all I could do to keep from throwing up over the side.

I'd hardly begun to tie up NewsHound when the three men were off the boat and headed towards a flat-black GMC Suburban parked a few yards off the pier. They were out of the parking lot by the time I tied up my boat, sprinted up the pier and jumped behind the wheel of my 1974 short-wheel-base Land Rover.

I'd lost sight of the bad guys, but there's only one road leading away from the pier and into Boxley Cove proper. Once they hit town, though, they could head in any direction. I had little more than half an hour to catch up before losing them.

I drove as fast as I could, steering with my knees while hauling the magnetic "Fowler Cruising Inc." sign in off the driver's side door

and checking my cell phone to see if it was working.

Back when cell phones were the newest thing, I'd been suckered into signing one of those locked-in-for-life deals. Nowadays, while the rest of the world packs tiny, featherweight micro-phones, I'm stuck with something that weighs more than NewsHound's main anchor and is only slightly more reliable than two tin cans and a piece of string. Not surprisingly, now that I really needed it, it wasn't working.

We were just about in town when I caught up with them. They were cruising along, chatting away like a really ugly family on vacation, and looking pretty darned nonchalant for three guys who just murdered a harmless little grifter.

Once they hit town, they'd be easy to follow. Boxley Cove is pretty much like Key West was a hundred years ago before greed and tourism ruined the place. It's not exactly Margaritaville, but you wouldn't be altogether surprised to find Jimmy Buffett wandering about the place. Three dark-suited thugs in a black Suburban would have a hard time keeping a low profile.

Just for the hell of it, I gave the cell phone another try and, wonder of wonders, I got a signal. I hit the 911 speed dial.

"Boxley Cove Police Department - Com Center," a briskly efficient woman's voice said.

"This is Rex Fowler of Fowler Cruising," I said. "A man's been killed on my boat."

"You want Coast Guard, Sir."

"No," I said. "He's been killed and the guys who did it are headed into town."

I gave the dispatcher a quick run down of my little afternoon adventure, trying not to sound like too much of a nutbar. She seemed to get the point.

"Okay Sir," she said. "Stay on the line, please."

I looked up ahead. The big Chevy was still six or seven cars ahead of me. The dispatcher came back on the line.

"Sir," she said, "I've alerted the patrol division, scrambled the south sector Tactical Team, and dispatched a K-9 unit. Homicide has been notified. Harbor Division is diverting two boats to your location and Air One has a chopper on the way. Underwater Search and Rescue has a diver standing by and we're sending a paramedic unit."

Wow! Nobody, but nobody, mobilizes like the Boxley Cove Police Department.

There's a good reason for that. Every small town has a founding family. We've got the McAllisters. New Yorkers originally, they moved to Florida just after the war and made millions dumping toxic waste into the Everglades.

Eventually the stench of what they'd done got too much to bear,

so old man McAllister moved his family and his millions as far away from the Glades as he could get without actually leaving the state. They settled in Boxley Cove and, in the way of most slimy robber barons, got all philanthropic and set out to buy their way into respectability. But where most rich folk endow libraries, build hospitals or give money to universities, the McAllisters, for reasons known only to themselves, gave nearly everything they owned to the Boxley Cove Police Department.

Today the force operates at no cost to the taxpayer thanks to a huge, professionally managed investment fund that spits out money like a Vegas slot gone wonky.

Our cops, of whom we have hundreds, drive brand-new, 200-horsepower Chrysler Intrepids fitted with armored glass, Kevlar door panels, run-flat tires and on-board computers Bill Gates would get hard-ons over. The air unit flies a Bell 407, the same chopper the LAPD uses, but ours is newer, faster and better equipped. We have two Tactical Teams, dogs, divers, sharpshooters, a fully-equipped forensic unit and the only police boats in Florida the drug dealers can't outrun.

It'd be really useful stuff if we had any crime to speak of.

#

The three killers got away thanks to my crappy cell phone.

While we still had a connection, I gave the 911 dispatcher my exact location and told her to expect a black Suburban to roll into downtown Boxley Cove inside ten minutes. While she got on the radio and assembled the world's biggest police welcoming committee, I concentrated on following the truck.

The last exit before the city leads to the Southport Mega Mall, a grotesque shopping complex that's working hard to suck the life out of our downtown business district. Suddenly, the driver of the truck veered off, taking the exit at high speed.

I grabbed the phone and started yelling, but it was as dead as a bug on a windshield. I would have been better off sending a letter for all the good it did.

I slid open the window and stuck the phone's antenna against the Land Rover's steel door pillar in a lame attempt to MacGyver myself a super-transmitter, but it was useless. Unless I learned to yell really loud, nobody was going to hear a thing I said.

So while two-dozen heavily armed cops waited in Boxley Cove and another twenty or so stood by with weapons drawn near the harbor, the three men who killed Sharkey Drysdale drove casually down the road to Wal-Mart.

#

Some people go gaga with ecstasy at the sight of men's polyester shirts at three for \$12.99, do-it-yourself beer-making kits and reduced-to-clear copies of celebrity diet books. People like that go ape shit for the Southport Mega Mall. Then there are folks like me, who'd rather have a root canal.

Built, like all malls, in the Neo-American Brutal architectural style, it exudes all the warmth and charm of a state correctional facility. Essentially, the Mega Mall is just a huge box surrounded by acres and acres of free parking. It's the sort of place that makes me wish we had more of an arson problem here in town.

The black Suburban pulled into the main entrance near the International House of Macramé, drove past Sailor Bob's Lobster Village and parked near the Taste-O-Rama food court. I followed, slipping my Land Rover into a handicapped spot and dropping down below the dash until the three hit-men had passed by.

I lifted my head and saw them walking towards the main entrance near a taxi stand where three beaten-to-death yellow cabs sat waiting for fares.

I was halfway to the entrance, walking briskly, when as if responding to a silent signal, the three men split up. As each hopped into a different cab, the drivers gunned their engines and fled for the exits.

I froze for a second, hoping to spot a fourth taxi so I could jump in the back seat, wave a crisp twenty in the driver's face and growl "follow that cab," like a real desperado.

Failing that, I hot-footed it back to my Land Rover. The second I grabbed the door handle, I knew something was screwy. The truck's angle was all wrong.

I checked the front end and found two flat tires, the valve stems carefully cut - probably by the same guy who was now leaving the mall at high speed behind the wheel of a black Chevy Suburban.

#

I walked back to the mall in hopes of finding a ride home. The taxi stand was empty save for a group of scantily clad fat people passing around a box of peanut brittle. I eyeballed their grotesque bodies and tossed my most disapproving stare suggesting, in my caring sensitive way, that they either put on some clothes or lose some weight. Funny how, even in the heat of the action, I have time to be rude.

I got back to NewsHound thanks to a scraggy looking teenager in a junkyard-reject muscle-car who really seemed to need the \$32 I paid

him for the ride.

It was past seven when I arrived at the dock. There were two patrol cars, light-bars blazing, parked on the pier and a dark blue, unmarked Chevy Caprice with blackwall tires, smoked windows and a brace of radio antennas popping up out the trunk lid. Short of a squad of Jehovah's Witnesses or a crack sales team from Metropolitan Life, it was the last thing I wanted to see.

"Where the fuck have you been, Fowler?" said Police Chief Cyrus R. Flockett, climbing out of the big car's back seat. "I got the whole damn department out looking for you."

"I've been at the mall," I said. "Chasing bad guys."

"That's our job, Fowler," Flockett said. "Now what's all this shit about one of your drug dealer buddies getting himself killed?"

"He's not exactly a buddy," I said. "More of an acquaintance. And he's not a drug dealer, either. Neither am I, for that matter"

Flockett rolled his eyes. As far as he's concerned, there are just two type of people in Florida - cops and drug dealers. He can't get his mind around the fact that a guy can be constantly short of money, own a serviceable boat and not be using it to smuggle dope.

Some days, I can't quite understand it myself.

It's not like I haven't been tempted. There's no shortage of guys around here willing to pay top dollar for a few hours of clandestine work. Four or five midnight drug runs out to a darkened ship and back to a deserted spot along the coast and my money worries would be all behind me.

Trouble is, once you get into that line of work you never get out. I've seen it happen a dozen times. Guys spend years making "one more run" until they make one run too many and end up doing fifteen years in the state pen stamping out license plates and getting gang-raped by beefy guys named Snake who don't wash all that often.

Thanks all the same, but I'd rather stay poor.

#

Two forty-something cop types in jeans and flak jackets with "D.E.T.F." in big yellow letters on the back climbed up from NewsHound's lower deck.

"Nothing yet, Chief," one of them said. "You wanna let the dogs have a sniff?"

About a year ago, Florida's law enforcement biggies set up the state-wide Drug Enforcement Task Force. All the major players joined up, Miami Police, Metro-Dade, state cops, DEA, Coast Guard. They almost fell off their squad cars laughing when the Boxley Cove Police Department asked to sign on.

They stopped chuckling when Cyrus Flockett brought them all out to see his speedboat collection and go for rides in the helicopter. The D.E.T.F. crowd didn't think much of the BCPD's drug fighting skills, but high-tech, big-budget gear like that was hard to get, so the big boys let Boxley Cove join up. Now the task force gets a chopper when it needs one and Cyrus R. Flockett gets to play major league drug cop.

Everybody's happy except, of course, the gentle citizens of Boxley Cove, most of whom enjoy a social toke now and then and are getting seriously tired of having their houses torn apart for a two-gram possession bust.

I was getting sick of it too. This wasn't the first time they'd searched my boat. I've got regular customers who spend less time on NewsHound than Flockett's drug squad.

"What the fuck is this, Flockett?" I yelled. "I'm a complainant here, for Chrissakes."

"And we're investigating your complaint," he said, with a smirk. "The boys here are just looking for clues."

"By tearing up my boat? And bringing in some doped-up sniffer puppy to drool on my carpets?"

"All part of a thorough inquiry," Flockett said. "And if we just happen to discover a stash of illegal substances during the course of said inquiry, well ..."

I gave up. I let Flockett's men finish searching my boat while I told my story to the least-bored of the two officers parked on the pier. Not that anything was going to come out of my report. Aside from his war-on-drugs obsession, Flockett is too busy running crooked fiddles and petty extortion rackets on the side to get interested in a real investigation. And in the Boxley Cove Police Department, if Chief Flockett isn't interested, nobody is.

No doubt about it, if anyone was going to track down the guys who killed Sharkey Drysdale, it would have to be me.

That's not quite as ridiculous as it sounds. A person looking for an investigator could do worse. Sharkey was my first murder, but by no means my first case. I've been doing private investigation work off and on since I moved down here.

I don't have a license and you won't find me in the Yellow Pages either. As far as the State of Florida, the local cops, the IRS and just about everybody else is concerned, I'm just a guy with a boat.

But now and again, I'll take on a job. Strictly on the side, of course. Cash only. No receipt. And if anybody official comes knocking, I know nothing.

I'm good at it, too.

Most PIs are ex-cops. I'm an ex-reporter. And in my opinion, reporters make better investigators. Ex-cops generally have a lot of

contacts back at their old department. They can usually run down a name, track a license plate or get their hands on somebody's criminal record with little more than a "hey-old-buddy" phone call and a promise to buy the next round.

Trouble is, after years on the force, cops are lost without their badge. It's a universal door opener, tongue loosener and all-round, general-purpose suspect intimidation tool. Without it, they're dead in the water.

Most police forces give departing cops some sort of a "retired officer" badge or let them keep their old shield. I've never met an ex-cop private investigator who didn't lean on that more often than he should.

Newspaper reporters, on the other hand, spend their careers convincing people who really ought to keep their mouth shut, to tell what they know, for free and for publication. In the private eye world, that skill beats the hell out of a black book full of "contacts" any day.

Not that I haven't got contacts of my own. You don't cover the police beat for as long as I did without making a few cop buddies. Which brings me to my ace-in-the-hole, Officer Travis. Stick around, you're going to like Officer Travis.

#

It didn't take as long as I expected to clean up NewsHound.

Flockett's drug cops had helped themselves to some of my pricey imported beer and the dog had pissed on the upper deck, but all-in-all I got off pretty light.

Last time they searched my boat, they'd cut open two of my leather seat cushions before I forced my way in and firmly suggested they take advantage of the zippers fitted to the back of the cushions expressly for the convenience of police officers.

I took the light search as a good sign. Flockett probably still thinks I run single-handedly the Medellin cocaine cartel, but maybe some of the rank-and-file boys are starting to realize what an upstanding, law-abiding citizen I truly am.

There's hope for me, yet.

#

My Land Rover was still stuck at the mall, so I walked home. My bungalow is only a couple of miles away and after all that happened, I needed to clear my head.

Walking along the highway, passing cars honked and drivers yelled rude things out their window as they sped by. I couldn't figure

out why until I realized I was swaying like a drunk with a death-wish and lurching dangerously close to the road.

I sat down on a steel crash barrier and waited for my body to calm down. I knew what was happening. I'd had a close brush with danger followed by a few hours of pulse-pounding action. My glands had been pumping out adrenaline all through the car chase and for some time after. Now it was time to pay the piper.

I'd known cops go through the same thing, racing hell-bent-for-leather through a shootout or a particularly hard takedown, then falling apart when it was all over.

I remember one particular incident, a car chase in Miami. I'd picked it up on my police scanner and joined in at the rear. The cops knew me and recognized my vehicle so as long as I stayed clear of the main action, I was allowed to run with the pack.

Well, I was in the chase for an hour and the lead cruiser had been in pursuit for almost two when, out of the blue, the target, a coked-up parolee in a stolen Lexus, ran out of gas, rolled gently to a stop, jumped out of the car with his hands on his head and surrendered as peacefully as could be.

I saw the door of the lead car open. Out jumped a cop I knew slightly, Sgt. Dick Somethingorother. He took a step forward, reached for his sidearm and collapsed in a heap on the ground.

I thought he'd been shot and, apparently, so did everybody else. The cops let fly with every weapon they had and laid down a field of fire that turned that Lexus to tin foil and killed the driver in seconds.

Turned out, the Sergeant hadn't been shot. The driver wasn't even carrying. The cop had been so pumped with adrenaline that when the chase ended his body just shut down. It was that or burn up.

A milder form of the same thing was happening to me so, having no wish to wander into the road and be turned into a hood ornament, I sat down for half an hour to give my body chemistry time to balance out.

Once I calmed down enough to think logically, it was pretty obvious I was never really in danger. The three thugs hadn't planned to kill me. If they had, they wouldn't have arranged that elaborate escape plan. And they'd have brought along someone with enough boat-handling skills to sail NewsHound back to Boxley Cove.

But why go to all that trouble? I couldn't imagine a more elaborate killing. They must have followed Sharkey long enough to figure out he'd eventually take his victims out on my boat, then set themselves up as marks and waited for the little con-man to bite. The actual killing was probably the easiest part. Likely a silenced pistol and some lead weights in that green duffel bag. And then the escape - a truck, three cabs with drivers, someone to let down my tires and drive

off in the Suburban. A lot of effort to kill a five-foot-nothing, out of shape, unarmed con man.

And what about me? Whoever put this deal together didn't leave anything to fate. They knew what my truck looked like and where I parked it. They must have known all about my chilly relationship with the local cops. Probably knew I wasn't packing any weaponry on NewsHound.

But who the fuck were these guys? And what the fuck else did they know? I started to feel more and more like Sgt. Dick. It was all I could do not to collapse in the road myself.

Oh, about that car chase - Metro-Dade Internal Affairs ruled the dead auto thief a clean shooting so we all went out and got wasted to celebrate.

#

My place is a tired old bungalow far enough off the beaten track to give me a little peace and quiet, but not so far away as to make me look like some sort of a boat-owning Unabomber.

It's a dump, but it's cheap and I like it. Charlie Gannon, one of our local slumlords, gives me a break on the rent. In return, I let him use the place now and again when I'm out on the boat and he needs a quiet spot, away from the prying eyes of Mrs. Gannon, to conduct some extra-curricular business with one of his rotating stable of long-legged, boob-heavy, trashy blond "secretaries."

Charlie goes for the sort of office worker who wears a pager clipped to her bra strap and calls everybody "honey." He's been through hundreds of such "secretaries" over the years and, as far as I know, still types all his own letters.

I saw from the lack of wine bottles in the wastebasket and the fact that my ashtrays weren't filled with lipstick-stained menthol butts, that Charlie and Friends hadn't been around in a while.

I cut a chunk of light rye bread, broke off a piece of cheese, grabbed a couple of boiled eggs, poured myself a glass of orange juice, snapped on the TV, and sat down to let the late-night news wash over me.

I don't get cable out where I live, but I do pick up the local Boxley Cove channel and a couple more out of Tallahassee. I surfed back and forth amongst them, but there was no mention of Sharkey Drysdale.

The big story on all three newscasts was still last month's acquittal of mobster Vittorio Gannachetti. I hadn't been following the story closely, but what I had heard did strike me as odd.

Gannachetti, a New York mobster who moved to Miami about five years ago when one of his quack doctors told him he needed constant

sunshine to stave off certain death, gets busted by the feds for the usual laundry list of gambling, drugs, loan sharking and running hookers.

The federales indict Gannachetti in Tallahassee and the case goes before Judge Nelson "Hard Case" Ardley. Ardley is every district attorney's dream judge. A cum laude graduate of the "fair trial and a good hangin'" school of jurisprudence, he's generally reckoned to be slightly to the right of Attila the Hun. From day one, Gannachetti's lawyers start arguing for a change of venue. To no one's surprise, their efforts fail.

The trial goes ahead and from that point on, nobody can figure out what the hell is happening. Hard Case Ardley drops his "never give a defendant an even break" courtroom persona and makes a complete about-face. For no apparent reason, the toughest judge in the state turns into a poster boy for the rights of the accused. The prosecutor can't say "boo" without a stern warning from the bench. Legally obtained evidence is tossed out on the flimsiest excuse. Meanwhile, Gannachetti's thousand-dollar-an-hour legal whores run riot, badgering some witnesses, threatening others and generally carrying on like they own the place.

Ardley's instructions to the jury include not only a completely unwarranted attack on the feds' handling of the case, but a tragic re-telling of Gannachetti's troubled youth. By the time his honor was done, there wasn't a dry eye in the jury box. It took twelve men and women less than two hours to come back with a verdict of not guilty on all counts.

Gannachetti walked and, soon after, Judge Nelson Ardley announced his intention to retire as soon as a replacement could be found.

CHAPTER 2

I woke up the next morning to the sound of ringing church-bells, which was odd considering the closest place of worship is a drive-through funeral home about nine miles away.

It took me a while to figure out that the sound was my brain pounding to get out of my head. My mouth felt like a backed up vacuum cleaner filter bag and the rest of my body wasn't much better. For a guy who doesn't drink anymore, it was one hell of a hangover.

There was a time in my life when I woke up like this every morning. Now it took a murder, a car chase and a bunch of nasty cops, but the overall result was the same.

I'd fallen asleep with the TV on and now some perky, housewifey-looking woman in a lime-colored spandex number was bouncing

around like a chipmunk on speed and urging me to "shake it to the right, and left, and" I knocked the thing off, picked up the stale bread and sweating cheese that had been my supper and padded into the kitchen for coffee.

I'm a nut for decent coffee. In most things, I don't care. I eat junk food, wear shitty clothes and, as I said, live in a dump. But I won't drink the watered-down, brown dishwater that passes for coffee in most parts of this country. I've got the Gaggia on NewsHound (which only works about half the time and seems to go through rubber seals like they're given away for free) and a few more caffeine-related goodies at home.

I unscrewed my single-cup Italian espresso maker, filled the water reservoir with overpriced mineral water, added four healthy scoops of Arabica Dark to the coffee trap, screwed the whole thing together and set it on the stove to brew. When it was done, I'd have a cup of joe fit to wake a dead horse.

While my coffee maker was working its magic, I made a quick call to Victor's Auto Garage (slogan: Foreign and Domestic Cars Our Specialty.) and told Vic to send one of the boys out to bring my Land Rover in from the Mega Mall, fix up my front tires and get someone to drive it out to the bungalow. By the time Vic got all that done, I figured I'd be recovered enough to face the day.

I paged through The Cove Clarion, our local weekly, while I drank the coffee. For a free paper that supports itself on advertising from small, local businesses it's not a bad little rag. I worked there for a while, which is part of the reason Chief Cyrus Flockett hates me so much.

I'd written a decent three-part series on police department corruption. It wasn't really big stuff, no killing or dope dealing. But there was so much penny-ante graft that even the laid-back denizens of Boxley Cove got so tired of being ripped-off by their own police department that they started asking whether we should be looking around for a new chief.

The mayor put together a commission of inquiry and, for a few weeks, it looked as if old Cyrus was on his way out.

Flockett survived. He's a smooth talker when he needs to be and folks round here figured you didn't run a man out of town for rigging the parking meters, charging business owners a monthly "patrol fee" and running an auto repair business out of the police department garage. As for the fifty cops who existed on the payroll but nowhere else, most people figured we have enough officers on the street as it is.

But ever since then, the chief has had a thing for me and for The Cove Clarion. When he's not ripping my boat apart looking for drugs

he's hassling the paper. Any local business running an advertisement in the Clarion can count on the BCPD enforcing every parking offense and petty by-law within a two-mile radius. Luckily for us, Boxley Cove is a veritable hotbed of anti-authority small businesspeople willing to keep the little weekly paper from sinking.

Apart from a small item about Flockett buying patrol-car sirens from his brother at five times the going rate, there wasn't a lot in the current issue. The mayor opened a natural healing spa, bringing our town total up to seven. The tarot readers' convention was reported to be a huge success with "forecasting professionals" from nine countries attending. And Bentley Van Astral, our local doomsday prophet once again revised his end-of-the-world predictions in light of the fact that his last date had come and gone without the sky falling in. Aside from that, there wasn't much and I finished the paper long before I finished my coffee.

Things must have been slow in the stealing-cars-on-the-side business, because Vic's boys got my truck out to me well before noon. I paid the ridiculous bill (2 rubber valve stems: eighteen bucks plus labor. A bit steep, I thought.), hopped aboard, dropped in a worn-out Style Council cassette and cruised down to McAllister Center, better known as the luxuriously appointed headquarters of the Boxley Cove Police Department.

The morning shift was just coming off duty, so I waited around. Soon Officer Travis emerged from the parking garage, headed for the locker room. What a sight. Seductively attired in the standard-issue, all-black, made-to-measure BCPD uniform. Officer Travis was one hot-looking young cop.

"Hello Lara," I said, figuring "Love me, marry me, have my children" was a bit over the top for a police station.

"Hi ya, Rex," she answered. "What's up? Big case? Or are you dateless again?"

#

The first time I met Officer Lara Travis, I was doing 62 in a forty-mile-an-hour zone. When she pulled me over, I fixed on her with my sparkling baby blues, jauntily tossed back my black wavy hair, and hit her with a sultry voiced suggestion that we skip the ticket and have an early dinner instead.

She gazed back deep into my eyes, put her hand gently on my arm, whispered "no fucking way, pal" in my ear and wrote me up for doing 70.

I've been ass-over-teakettle for her ever since.

#

Lara came out of the locker room. She'd changed into a pair of Reeboks, loose-cut blue jeans and an oversized white cotton shirt. She looked like a dream. If the bottom ever falls out of the law enforcement business, look for Lara Travis front and center on the next issue of Glamour. Personally, I preferred the cop get-up, but that's just me. Lara looks pretty good in civvies, too.

Of course, tall, slender women with sultry lips, sky-high cheekbones, bob-cut naturally blond hair and brilliant green eyes tend to look good in just about anything.

"It's been a while," she said. "I was starting to think you'd moved out of town."

Lara's not one for pouring out her life story and I'm not one for complaining. It's been my experience that when two people get to that stage where they swap autobiographies, it never does much for the relationship. And in my case, given the forty-proof distilled nature of most of my adult life, it often does a fair bit of harm.

I do know that Lara comes from some little nothing town in Arkansas - Dry Gulch or Dead River or some "starring Clint Eastwood" name like that. She's 31. Or 32. I'm not sure exactly. A few years younger than me, anyway.

She's ex-LAPD. Did six or seven years out in sunny CA, before coming here and still calls cruisers "black-and-whites" even though BCPD prowl cars are all-white with a two-tone stripe.

Lara doesn't talk about it much, but she once told me that she quit the LA force after some sort of an excessive force complaint, which seems odd considering she usually manages to sweet talk her perps into cuffing themselves. Still, Los Angeles is a weird place and people do odd stuff out there. Meek, mild, quiet people are always moving out to LA and turning into dope dealing transvestites or drive-by gangbangers or Martin Short.

I do know she's been in Boxley Cove about a year longer than me and that the entire BCPD thinks the sun rises and sets on her. Even Chief Flockett likes Lara, despite her refusal to get involved in any of his little sideline rackets.

"I promised Bobby I'd go see him," Lara said. "Want to ride along."

"Sure," I said.

"He'll be happy to see you. Bobby is your biggest fan."

Bobby is Lara's brother. He's ... well I don't know what you call it. Retarded, or whatever the politically correct word is. From what I understand, Bobby is basically a kid in a man's body. He's been that

way all his life. I don't know all the details, but I know that when Bobby was a child, Lara and her dad used to spend hours teaching him simple things (the sort of things ordinary kids pick up in minutes) over and over again until he got them. They discovered he could learn most anything, but you had to put in the time teaching him. Where Lara got the patience, I don't know. She went all through high school and college with little in the way of a social life, spending every spare hour with Bobby. When he got older and needed special teachers, Lara worked weekends and summers to pay for them.

All that effort and sacrifice paid off and today he's got his own place, a sort of a job and pretty much his own life. I've even heard whisperings of a girlfriend, though I've never actually seen her.

We were headed down a hallway towards the staff parking lot.

"Let's take my truck," I said, steering Lara towards the visitor's lot.

"No," she said. "We'll take mine."

Lara drives one of those little beer-can cars. It's really just a motorcycle with big ideas. I can't stand the thing and I'm sure that one day we'll run into a low-flying mosquito and get crushed by the impact.

"You've been driving for eight hours," I said. "Time for a rest. Besides, I want to try out my new valve stems."

"No dice."

"Got a Shania Twain tape in the glove box."

"Forget it."

"Come on, Lara," I said. "Think of the gas you'll be saving."

That got her. We took my truck.

Lara isn't exactly cheap. She pays her own way in the world. In fact, it's a point of pride with her. She's just extremely careful with money. She drives a \$9,000 car, lives in an inexpensive apartment, wears sensible clothes that don't go quickly out of fashion and shops for bargains.

That's a big part of the Lara and me thing. She's sensible; I'm foolish. She saves a fifth of her salary; I cash-advance Visa to pay MasterCard. She keeps a clean, tidy house; I live in a dump. We've got this big attraction happening, but we both know there's just no way it's ever going to work.

Actually, Lara knows. I figure we could work around it. But the fact is, she's the boss.

#

It's a good hour's drive out to Bobby's place, plenty of time for me to fill Lara in on what had happened.

It was interesting to note that she hadn't heard a thing about it. No mention at the duty briefing. No be-on-the-look-outs, or BOLOs in cop-speak. My thoughts about Chief Flockett's lack of interest seemed to be right on the money.

I told her everything I knew about Sharkey Drysdale from the day I met him to the day he died.

By the time we arrived at Bobby's, Lara had agreed to help me out as much as she could. She'd start by running Sharkey's name through the police computer. Maybe we'd get lucky.

Bobby happened to be looking out the window and recognized my Land Rover. He was down to the lobby and out the front door by the time we'd parked.

You wouldn't know he's slow, at first. He'd be a handsome enough guy except for a certain subtle slackness of features that often comes with developmental problems.

"Hi you two. Would you like to come in?" he said, keeping a natural tendency to slur under control. Bobby couldn't say a single intelligible word until he was seven. But by the time he was twelve, after years of patient coaching from Lara, he could carry on a conversation almost as well as any other boy his age.

We followed him inside and up the elevator. Bobby lives in one of those group home deals where they try to give people as much independence as they can handle without completely cutting them off. He has a small one-room apartment that, frankly, puts my place to shame. He's got a cat, too, that he just dotes on. It's a big burly thing with some funny name I can never recall.

I remember one time I gave Bobby a ride out to the supermarket. He spent a full twenty minutes picking out a can of cat food, reading the labels on every one, comparing protein-per-serving with fat-as-a-percentage-of-volume until he'd found the perfect meal. What ever happened to the days when a housecat was happy with a bowl of milk and the occasional dead mouse?

"So how you been, big guy?" I said. "Hope you're keeping out of trouble."

Bobby laughed and ran off to the kitchen to make tea. It's a running joke between us. Bobby is about as likely to get into trouble as I am to start drinking instant coffee. He should be warning me.

As he left, Lara mouthed the words, "Don't tell him about Sharkey."

I had no plans to.

"I've been working," Bobby said.

He'd brought out tea and cookies, a plate of cheese and crackers, some funny-looking snacks for the cat and a box of those thin After Eight mints that I'm nuts about. He knows I like them and must keep a

box in the fridge for the few times I drop by.

"I've been working a lot."

Bobby works for a non-profit outfit called Can-Do Industries. They try to line up work for retarded folks. The company has a contract with some local real estate outfits to install and remove "for sale" signs and they get a few park maintenance jobs from the city, but it's an uphill battle. The unemployment rate for people like Bobby is out of this world.

I haul NewsHound out of the water four times a year for a hull scraping and I farm the work out to Can-Do with a nudge-nudge, wink-wink rider that they throw the job to Bobby. He does a good job and we generally make a day of it. Lara doesn't know a thing about that and I've got no plans to tell her.

"How about you, Rex?" Bobby said. "Sailing a lot?"

"Oh yeah. Out all the time."

"NewsHound's hull must be covered with barnacles by now, eh?"

I laughed and made a mental note to suggest to the folks at Can-Do Industries that they transfer the Bobster to their sales department.

We stayed about an hour and a half, drinking too much tea, eating too many sandwiches and chocolate mints and saying too many nice things about the cat. By the end of it, I was ready to go. I like Bobby and, given what he started with, he's one of life's winners. But there's no way around it, it's an effort.

Not for the first time, I realized how the boy had hit the jackpot with a sister like Lara. She must have some hidden strengths the rest of us don't possess to have taken in a mentally handicapped brother, brought him up, got him into the right schools and finally set him on his way.

I could never have done that. I'd have been gone faster than a fart in a windstorm.

#

"So what's the next step?" Lara said, after we'd said our good-byes to Bobby and climbed back into my truck.

"About Sharkey?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I'll just drop it," I said. "None of my business really. Might as well leave well enough alone."

Lara laughed. "I've never seen you leave anything alone, even when it's none of your business."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Lara said. "I don't have to bring up Farley Morris, do I?"

Farley Morris works the fuel stop at the pier where I dock NewsHound. It's not a big operation, sort of a gas station for boats but with a convenience store attached. Farley's about a million years old and he's run the place since dinosaurs roamed the earth.

A year and a half ago, I noticed that Farley was slipping away at all sorts of weird hours. I was sleeping on my boat while Charlie Gannon fumigated and made minor repairs to my bungalow. Or that's what he said he was doing. When I got back, the place was as bug-infested and run-down as ever, so I reckon he was conducting one of his periodic secretarial talent hunts.

Anyway, I was sleeping on the boat and, being a bit of a night owl, was often up on deck in the late evening. Every night about 11:30, Farley would scamper the few hundred yards down from his house to the pier where he keeps his car parked and drive off. Then about half past six in the morning, he'd come back, quietly park his car and sneak back home.

I figured something was up. Lara told me to drop it, but I was convinced. With anyone other than Farley, I'd have put it down to another woman and left it alone. But Farley's romancing days are well behind him and even if they weren't, there are few women in this world interested in a 100-year-old guy with bad breath and no teeth.

So I tailed him. Every night for a week I waited until he drove out of the parking lot, pulled in behind him and followed.

And every night he shook my tail in ten minutes flat. I've never seen a guy drive like Farley. James Bond couldn't follow that old gaffer.

One night, he slipped out, I followed and about a mile up the road he stopped. There was nowhere for me to go, so I pulled over and killed the lights. Farley got out of his car and walked back to my Land Rover.

"You don't give up, do you, Rex?" he said.

I mumbled something really lame.

"All right," he said. "It's the last night and I'm sure you're bursting with curiosity. Follow me."

We ended up at a construction site. Farley parked, unlocked a white trailer and went inside. When he came out he'd changed into a pair of cheap brown polyester pants and a light blue shirt with Vanguard Security patches on the arms.

Turns out, his wife had always wanted to visit Epcot Center. Her birthday was coming up and Farley was moonlighting at six bucks an hour to save up the cash to take her.

I felt like a creep and I tried to make it up to Farley by taking him and his wife out for a romantic dinner on NewsHound the night before they went to Epcot.

Farley forgave me pretty easily, but even today, whenever I see him I feel like the sort of guy who wears rubber underpants and hangs around schoolyards.

#

"Trouble is, I really don't know where to start," I said to Lara as my Land Rover struggled to climb the sort of hill normal cars barely notice. "Those three thugs are probably long gone by now."

My truck is really designed for the wilds of Africa or the Australian outback. It'll ford a raging river or haul a pack of elephants up the north face of the Eiger, but it's hopelessly under-powered on a paved road. I love it, but more than one person has questioned why I drive a vehicle with more ground clearance than King Kong, but a zero-to-sixty time that's measured in weeks.

"Start with Sharkey," she said. "What do you know about him?"

"Not a lot. And what I do know, he likely made up."

"I'll run his name through the department computer," she said. "Speaking of which, Sharkey can't be his real name. I can't imagine Mr. and Mrs. Drysdale naming their child after a really mean fish."

"No," I said. "He made that up, too. His real name is Sheldon."

"Sheldon?"

"Yeah," I said. "But don't tell anybody. I promised to keep it a secret."

"He's dead, remember."

"I know," I said. "But if you were dead, would you want to be remembered as a Sheldon?"

"Good point," Lara said. "Anyway, I'll run his name and see what comes up. And you see what you can find out."

"I think he lives here someplace in town," I said. "We should check it out."

"We?"

"Sure, you got plans for today?"

"No," Lara said. "But I have a nasty sense that 'check the place out' involves forcing open a back door and knocking out the burglar alarm."

"Don't let anyone ever say Rex Fowler doesn't know how to show a girl a good time," I said.

"No way," Lara said. "I'm a cop, remember. Can't do that kind of thing in Boxley Cove unless you're actually working for Cyrus Flockett."

"All right," I said. "I'll do the house. That leaves us a free afternoon. Fancy a romantic lunch on the water? I know a handsome guy with his own boat."

"I'd love to," Lara said. "But another day. Let's track down that

truck, instead."

"Truck?"

"The black Suburban," Lara said. "You didn't happen to get a plate number, did you?"

"No," I said.

"We'll give it a shot without the plate," Lara said. "It shouldn't be too hard. Not much chance those three guys were local. So they probably flew in. Which means the truck has got to be stolen or a rental."

"I'd put my money on a rental," I said. "You could screw up an entire operation driving a hot truck. Those boys were too organized for that."

"So we check the rental places," Lara said. "See if anybody remembers anything."

"There's a million of those."

"True," Lara said. "But we can narrow it down. Nearest airport is Tallahassee, so they probably flew in and rented the truck there. And we may get a break with the truck, too. It's not going to be a common rental."

"Good point," I said. "Not too many tourists want to jaunt around sunny Florida in a big, black Chevy Suburban."

"So turn this bucket of old bolts around, Fowler," Lara said. "And set course for Tallahassee."

Which is what I did. It wasn't quite the romantic lunch under sail I'd hoped for, but it was Rex and Lara together again.

And that was just fine with me.

#

Nobody walks anywhere anymore and public transport in this country is deader than public television so, not surprisingly, the airport was chock-a-block with car rental companies.

We knocked off Hertz pretty quickly. They don't rent Suburbans. Avis had two, but both were white.

Southern Auto took a while longer.

"Hello there," I said, after waiting a full twenty minutes while an elderly gent who couldn't have been more than four feet tall and his 85-pound wife rented themselves a full-sized Mercury Marquis. "We're looking for a black Chevrolet Suburban."

"Got just what you need," said the fresh-scrubbed young man behind the counter.

"Can we take a look at it?" Lara asked, with a smile.

"Sure can," said the youth.

He tossed a "back in 5 minutes" sign on the desk, hopped out a

trapdoor under the counter and led us down into the parking garage to a bright red, Ford Explorer.

"That's not what we asked for," I said.

"Sure ain't," said the youth. "This is much better."

"But ..."

"Ford builds a better truck," he said. "You got more power in the Explorer and superior mileage, too. It's all in the fuel injection."

"We asked about a Suburban," Lara said.

"Good machine, the Suburban," the young man said. "Lotsa room. But this baby is just about as roomy. And she's got a lot more cup holders."

"We don't care about upholders."

"Wait until you've been on the road awhile. You'll appreciate them."

"Listen, dude," I said, in my best cut-the-shit voice. "All we want to know is do you or do you not have a black Suburban."

"Black!" he snapped back. "In this weather! You'll fry up in a black car. Even with factory air (which all our rentals come with, by the way), you'll cook up like Granny's gumbo."

Finally, exasperated, Lara put her arm around the youth and led him around the far side of the Explorer. She placed her arm around his shoulder, looked deep into his eyes and said a few words I didn't catch. The boy muttered something and Lara let him go.

"They don't rent Suburbans," she said to me. "Ford products only."

"So what's with the kid?" I asked. "Why the hard sell?"

"He's on commission," she said. "He's saving up to buy a computer."

#

Lara didn't like the idea much, but I convinced her we'd be at the airport all day if she didn't use her badge.

"I'm out of my jurisdiction, you know."

"You don't have to arrest anybody," I said. "Just flash the tin, tell them who you are and ask a few polite questions"

It worked like a charm. Our hunch about the Suburban being a rental rarity paid off. Nobody seemed to have them for hire.

In fact, we'd checked every rental outlet in the place and were on our way out when we spotted Budget Buster U-Drive hidden halfway down a little-used passageway near the lost-baggage counter. We would have missed it had I not been wandering around in search of a water fountain.

"We may as well check it out," Lara said, looking at the forlorn

counter and faded sign. "Though I won't be surprised if they've got nothing but go-carts and army trucks."

"Sure we've got Suburbans," said the rental agent. "We've got six of them, all black."

"Really?"

"Yeah. The company bought them used from the National Parks Service. They run great," she said, perking up at the prospect of a sale. I had the feeling we'd be the first of the day.

Lara pulled out her badge and slid it across the counter. She has a smooth way with her shield. Most cops brandish the thing like a weapon, but Lara knows how to gently introduce hers in way that's forceful, yet doesn't get a person's back up. Lara Travis is one of the few cops I know who manages to go about her business without leaving a trail of bruised egos in her wake.

"My name is Officer Lara Travis," she said. "I'm with the Boxley Cove Police Department. This is Rex Fowler. I'm afraid we're not here to rent a truck."

"What are you here for, Officer?" the girl said.

"We need your help. And please, call me Lara."

"Okay, Lara."

We told her what we were doing and the girl was more than happy to turn over her records to us. Paging through a massive ledger book, it was clear that Budget Buster U-Drive wasn't about to knock Hertz out of the number-one spot.

The company seemed to buy up job lots of vehicles nobody else wanted. As well as the six Suburbans, they had four former UPS delivery trucks, a repainted hearse, a tow truck and a fleet of ex-phone company panel vans. The closest thing Budget Buster U-Drive had to a normal car was a half-dozen Hyundai Stellars bought cheap from the now-defunct Ride-4-Less Taxi Company.

We were only interested in the Suburbans. Of the six, three hadn't left the lot in two months. One was on a long-term lease to a construction firm. The other two looked likely. Number S-1765 had been rented two days ago and returned this morning. S-1763 had been rented out last week and returned very late last night.

Both had been paid for with credit cards. It took a few minutes for the rental agent to sift through her files and retrieve the card slips.

We eliminated one rental immediately. It was a corporate MasterCard and both Lara and I thought it highly unlikely that Sharkey Drysdale had been murdered by a senior auditor from the Internal Revenue Service.

That left S-1763.

"Well we've found it," Lara said. "That's definitely the truck."

"No doubt," I said. "But this doesn't help at all."

The rental agent wouldn't let us take the credit card slip. She needed it to process the charge. But there was no way Lara and I were going to forget what we'd seen. The signature was messy, but legible. And the name embossed onto the card was clear as a bell.

Both said the same thing: "S. Drysdale."

CHAPTER 3

I tried once again to convince Lara Travis to "check out" Sharkey Drysdale's place with me, but I knew it was an exercise in futility. I dropped her back at police headquarters so she could pick up her beer-can car and go home.

"You know, Lara," I said. "I could do Sharkey's place tomorrow."

"Sure, if you like."

"That would give us both a free evening," I said. "Are you up for dinner?"

She wasn't. She'd had a long day, blah, blah, blah, needed rest for tomorrow's day shift and so on and so forth. I didn't press the point.

There would be plenty of time to woo the lovely Officer Travis. But how often does a guy get the chance to break and enter the home of a dead con-man?

As soon as I pulled out of the cop-shop parking lot, I realized I had no idea where Sharkey Drysdale lived. I'd hatched all sorts of ludicrous schemes for tracking him down before I got the brilliant idea to pull over at the next phone booth and see if he's in the book, which he was.

The address was a street in a quiet, upper-middle-class neighborhood in Boxley Cove. I don't know why, but I'd always pictured Sharkey living in something like Hugh Hefner's Playboy mansion.

Actually, I would have preferred that. Big estates have all sorts of fancy security systems, most of which (thanks to a summer job as an assistant alarm installer) I can defeat, but suburban communities are full of nosy people with nothing better to do with their time but stare out their windows looking for trouble. I don't make a habit of breaking into other people's houses, but when I do I'll take a high-priced alarm system over a bunch of Neighborhood Watch maniacs any day of the week.

I made one pass by Sharkey's house. I didn't see any alarm company stickers or rent-a-cop signs, which wasn't unusual. Given the size and strength of the Boxley Cove Police Department, private security has had a tough time gaining a foothold in this part of the world.

I drove up, parked the Land Rover, hopped out whistling a merry tune like a fellow without a care in the world and walked around to the back door, being careful to conceal the crowbar in my right hand. Like many houses, Sharkey's place had a reinforced mortise deadbolt on the front door and a flimsy piece of crap on the back.

Before attacking the door, I scanned the back wall for the phone line. Spotting it entering just below the kitchen window, I whipped a pair of cutters from my back pocket and snipped it in two. If Sharkey had a burglar alarm, that would prevent it from contacting the monitoring station. There would still be a siren, but they're a snap to knock out. Of course, he could have a cellular alarm hookup, but those things are expensive and most people don't bother.

I jammed the point of the crowbar into the door latch, gave it a firm haul and I was in. I couldn't have done it faster if I'd been given a key.

I closed the door and paused a moment, listening for the tell-tale whistle of an alarm system screaming for a code, but heard nothing.

Nice work, Fowler, I thought to myself. If the sailboat business ever falls on hard times, I could do B&Es for a living.

I was just congratulating myself on a smooth entry when I remembered I hadn't checked for the possibility of a Mrs. Drysdale or, worse yet, a pack of little kiddy Drysdales. Sharkey hadn't ever mentioned either, but then there was a lot about Sharkey he hadn't ever mentioned.

Figuring I'd rather be caught sooner than later, I took a quick dash through the house. It was empty. And you didn't have to be a master detective to know you were in the home of a single guy. The fridge held four beers, half a cold pizza and a tub of ice cream so old the wax seals had dissolved and little streams of butterscotch ripple had leaked out and dripped all over the vegetable drawer. The bed was unmade, the ashtrays full and all three bathroom towels lay in bundles on the floor. That and the lack of toilet paper on the roll was proof positive there had been no woman in Sharkey's life.

There was no computer either, which was a relief. Information stored on a computer is completely safe from me. I do know a fourteen-year-old hacker with bad skin and a complete lack of social skills who will, for an exorbitant fee, decipher passwords and extract what I need to know from the mess of programs and files and games and pornographic Internet downloads that most people store on their PCs. I bring him in when I have to, but I prefer to do my own digging the old fashioned way with a small flashlight and a nose for the good stuff.

Which is what I set out to do.

Sharkey, bless his dear departed (and soaking wet) soul, made

the job easy. He'd set up a small office in a tiny room near the back of the house. It was a mess, but everything connected with the business of conning the greedy and gullible out of their excess wealth was in that room.

Even the mess helped. With tidy people, you never know what's important. They file everything carefully and, unless they put dates on the stuff, you don't know whether you're looking at today's big deal or last year's old news. But with a mess, you just start at the top of the pile and work down.

From what I could see, Sharkey had been running one of his sunken treasure rackets. He had dozens of books on Spanish galleons. They were filled with exciting underwater pictures of bronze cannons, old coins and chests filled to bursting with bars of silver and gold. There was an entire book of nothing but photographs of Spanish doubloons.

The Florida coast is littered with sunken wrecks and, even today, men waste their entire lives trying to find them. You hear about the odd success now and again, but most of the poor fools find nothing more than lots of fish. They live in hope and die in despair.

Looking at the glossy picture books, I could almost understand what drives treasure hunters to do what they do. And I could certainly see why a con-man like Sharkey would base so many of his scams on tales of lost riches. It was almost irresistible

There were maps, too. Modern maps and reproductions of what looked to me like centuries-old marine navigation charts. I found one hand-drawn map showing the coast of Florida with what seemed to be a ship's course marked in red and another in blue. The red course was labeled Santa Castillo, the blue Neptune's Grace. Neither name meant anything to me.

At the back of the desk, behind the world's oldest answering machine, sat a cheap plywood bookshelf, half-filled with spiral notebooks. I found one labeled Santa Castillo.

There were pages and pages of detailed notes in Sharkey's handwriting. The Santa Castillo, he'd written, was a 160-foot galleon, part of a fleet of 28 ships sent out from Seville, Spain in 1622. The Spanish, at the time, dispatched two fleets a year to bring back gold, silver and treasure from the slave-run mines of South and Central America.

The Santa Castillo, according to its manifest, had been carrying 47 tons of cargo, mostly silver ingots, gold in bars and coin and various items of gold jewelry. In red ink, Sharkey had added "plus contraband!!!", but I had no idea what that meant.

There were notes about the Captain, but not his name, and the crew, an unskilled, poorly trained bunch of neer-do-wells, most of

whom were pressed against their will into service at sea. The ship, apparently, was no better. Unlike the proud, strong vessels seen in oil paintings, most Spanish galleons were run-down, badly maintained and often barely seaworthy. The Santa Castillo, if Sharkey's research was accurate, was no different.

I looked at my watch. Nearly an hour had passed. Plenty of time for one of Sharkey's neighbors to start wondering about the strange looking vehicle parked in the drive.

I'd been so caught up in Sharkey's note book, it hadn't occurred to me that the whole thing was probably a fabrication. If I knew Sharkey, there never was a Santa Castillo. The un-named captain was probably no more real than Homer Simpson. And those gold bars and silver ingots were likely just a fanciful dream, created in this very room for the sole purpose of enriching Sharkey Drysdale's bank account.

There was too much material to read at one time and I wasn't about to risk returning for another break in. I ran down to my truck and brought up an old hockey bag that I use to keep the spare tire from rattling. I packed as much as I could of the stuff connected with galleons and sunken treasure into the bag. I had to leave nearly all the books, but took every one of the spiral notebooks, most of the maps, some photos and a few loose papers. When I'd stuffed everything in, the bag was so full I couldn't zip it shut.

Before leaving, I rifled quickly through the desk drawers. Most were filled with junk. I pulled open the top-right-hand-side drawer and found in it dozens and dozens of drivers licenses, social security cards, business cards, health club passes, credit cards, and even passports. All carried different names and all carried signatures in the hand of Sharkey Drysdale. Those with photographs carried the little grifter's picture, as well. I left them alone.

I paid more attention to a rather expensive dark leather briefcase wedged between the desk and the wall. It was locked - two little brass clasps fitted with combination locks. They're easy enough to open. You simply push on the opening slider as hard as you can and run a finger over the combination wheels until you find the stiffest one. Slowly rotate the wheel until it clicks slightly. Find the next stiffest and rotate that. Repeat for the last wheel and the lock should pop open.

Not that I bothered. I just shoved the handle of my wire cutters between the case and each of the latches in turn, jerked it outwards and the briefcase snapped open. Who cares if I broke it? It wasn't like Sharkey was going to come back to life and charge me two hundred bucks for a new one.

There were two things inside (well, three if you count the unopened box of colored condoms), a spiral notebook marked Neptune's Grace and a small, black plastic address book. I took them

both.

Ahh, what the hell. I took the rubbers, too.

I walked briskly out Sharkey's back door, tossed the hockey bag into the Land Rover's rear compartment and zipped up the canvas flap. I scanned the road, which was empty save for a 200-horsepower Chrysler Intrepid with a stripe down both sides and a seven-pod Federal Signal Vector bar on the roof, one of many owned and operated by the Boxley Cove Police Department.

The futuristic-looking cruiser (folks in town call them "Robocops") was doing all of twenty miles an hour. I figured if he was after me, he'd be a damned sight quicker about it so, summoning my last reserves of exterior poise, I glanced at the cop in the driver's seat, smiled, tossed off a half-hearted wave and hopped into my truck.

The officer returned my wave and, still at a steady twenty miles an hour, cruised on by.

By the time I stopped shaking and got the Land Rover started, the patrol car was long gone.

#

"Lara, there's a ton of the stuff in there," I said, the next morning over the phone.

"And it's all about Spanish galleons?"

"Mostly," I said. "There was other material in the house, but it looked like it hadn't been touched in ages, so I left it. All the recent stuff is about galleons."

"About what?" Lara said. "I can hardly hear you. Let's meet later."

Lara was at a pay phone at the side of a busy road somewhere. I'd wanted to call last night, but I knew she'd be resting up for work so, in an uncharacteristic burst of self control, I waited until morning and called her pager.

Like most cops, Lara carries a personal beeper when she's on the job. All the BCPD cops have voice mail at the station, but since they spend their days out on the street, it's not much use. Many cops leave their pager numbers on their voice mail. Lara used to do that, but she quit when guys she'd pulled over and ticketed started calling her up and asking for dates. I know all about that. After all, that's how we met.

We arranged to meet at Grab-O-Java, one of those trendy Starbuckian joints in Lara's patrol sector. The coffee's pretty good and, more importantly, it's one of the few places in town that lets cops pay for their own coffee. Lara's a stickler for that sort of thing.

#

"You look like a teenager who's just discovered Daddy's Playboy stash," Lara said as I slid into the booth with her.

"I've got to admit, it's pretty gripping stuff," I said. "I've been up all night reading through Sharkey's notes and I've still got plenty to go."

I gave Lara the Reader's Digest condensed version of what I'd learned.

I told her all about the overloaded, badly maintained galleons lumbering sluggishly through the harsh waters around Florida. I painted a vivid word picture of the Santa Castillo and its 47 tons of gold, silver and treasure. I was, frankly, a natural storyteller.

"So this galleon sank, or what?" Lara asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "He's just got a lot of information about it. I figure it has to have sunk. I can't imagine Sharkey getting all excited about a ship that comes out here, loads up with treasure and sails happily back to Europe."

"There wouldn't be much point in that," Lara said.

"Trouble is, so far I haven't found where the ship went down. And if it did go down, somebody else might have salvaged it already."

That was more than likely. From the end of the Second World War to the late 60s, Florida was swamped with divers searching for downed wrecks. Most came up with nothing, but quite a few were salvaged.

Since then, the state has got in on the action and nowadays they're pretty fussy about who gets to dive for what. And if you do find anything, the government takes most of it from you. There are still plenty of hopefuls swimming around with the glint of gold-lust in their eyes, but nothing like there used to be.

If Sharkey Drysdale had been able to locate the wreck of the Santa Castillo, he probably wasn't the first. Those 47 tons of goodies are more than likely sitting in a museum case somewhere.

"You don't even know if there was a Santa Castillo," Lara said. "From what you tell me, it could have been just another Drysdale rip-off."

"That's what I thought," I said. "At first. But now I'm certain there's more to it."

"Why?" Lara said. "If he was running a scam, he'd have done some research. He'd have wanted to base as much of it on fact as he could."

"Not this much fact," I said. "I've seen Sharkey in action. He creates fantasies, then he sells them to greedy people with money. But this is no fantasy. There's too much detail. It just rings true. I know a

Drysdale scam when I see one, and this is something different."

"You're sure about that?"

"I'm convinced."

"Maybe you're right," Lara said, "But I think the bigger question is whether or not it had anything to do with Sharkey's murder."

"I can't see how it wouldn't."

"Look, this treasure thing is probably Drysdale's hobby," Lara said. "Just because he's a con-man, doesn't mean he has no private life. You're thinking that because he's a crook, everything in his life is crooked."

"Yeah."

"Oh, come on. Do you think insurance salesman do nothing but sell insurance? Or cops do nothing but enforce the law?" Lara said.

"Drysdale was no different. He goes to work every day and cons people out of their cash. Then he comes home, cracks open a beer and relaxes with a little sunken treasure hunting."

"Your point is?"

"My point is," Lara said, "he likely wasn't killed for his hobby. He was killed for his job. So let's concentrate on that. Don't forget, we got into this to find out who killed your friend, not to get rich on Spanish doubloons."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "Problem with that is I didn't find anything connected with the guys who killed him. When he was on my boat he was running some sort of Aztec or Mayan pyramid robbing scheme. The scam was that he needed up-front cash to bribe the guards at an ancient ruin so he could break in and make off with the contents. As far as I can remember, it had nothing to do with galleons."

"And you didn't see anything like that in the house?"

"No," I said. "Like I said, I didn't take everything. The treasure stuff looked like the biggest deal, so I concentrated on that."

"You might have to go back," Lara said.

"Before I do," I said, not looking forward to another close call with the Boxley Cove Police Department, "see what you make of this."

I slid over the address book I'd taken from Sharkey's briefcase. Lara flicked through it quickly.

"Names and numbers," she said. "This is useful."

"Not so fast," I said. "Look at the numbers."

I'd looked at them myself earlier. None of the entries looked like local numbers, but there were no area codes either. Either the whole book came from a completely different part of the country or Sharkey had some sort of code going.

"Can we crack the code?"

"I can't," I said. "I tried playing around with it. You know, simple

stuff, dialing backwards, adding and subtracting numbers, but nothing worked. If it's more sophisticated than that we need help. You wouldn't happen to know where to find a code breaker?"

"No," Lara said. "The names look real, though."

"Yeah," I said. "A lot of nicknames in there. We're not going to have much chance finding "Slim" and "Lucky," but there are a few you might want to run through the police computer. Can you do that without anyone noticing?"

"Sure," Lara said. "I'll spread them out over the day and call them in with my traffic stops. I should have them for you tomorrow, that's my day off."

"So if you turn up any leads, you could come with me and help track them down?" I said, trying to suppress a smile.

"I guess so," Lara said. "Sure. Why not?"

This was getting better all the time. First an afternoon at the airport with Lara. And now a full day together on the trail of Sharkey Drysdale's known associates. It was starting to look a lot like steady dating, but with some nifty detective work thrown in.

CHAPTER 4

Lara Travis came through with four solid leads.

I picked her up early on her day off. Lara lives in a small, two-room apartment in a quiet, mostly working-class part of town. It's a perfectly adequate little place, though a little low-rent for a city cop, but that's Lara. She must have Swiss blood in her the way she watches her cash.

She looked wonderful. She reminded me of those photos in People magazine of fashion models relaxing on their days off. They're always wearing some nondescript outfit that your mother might buy if her eyesight wasn't so great. Yet somehow, the whole look screams "Off-Duty Super-Model!!!"

Lara had that look in spades. She wore ankle-length hiking boots, khaki shorts with pockets everywhere and a cotton safari shirt. Only her belt, a thick, hand-tooled leather number, gave her away as an Arkansas girl far from home.

Sitting in my beat-up Land Rover with its canvas top and hood-mounted spare tire we looked like something out of a Ralph Lauren ad. Lara is tall for a woman, but I've got a few inches on her. My black hair looks well against her blond. And we both have the sort of tanned skin you'd expect to see on folks who live in this part of the world. By myself, despite some seriously blue eyes and a look that Lara calls "Alec Baldwin on a bad day," I probably wouldn't pass muster with Ralph's casting agents. But as a team, we might have a shot.

"What have you got?" I said, stirring the vat of porridge that passes for a Land Rover's transmission.

"Jefferson Dellavista, Festus Dubois, Raul Hortega and Wesley Keshman," Lara said, paging through a stack of police records. "All the same sort of thing. Nothing really major. No violence. A few felonies here and there, but mostly misdemeanors. Nearly all fraud related."

"Sounds like charter members of the Sharkey Drysdale fan club," I said. "Want to go alphabetically or start with the weirdest name and work back?"

"Let's hit Keshman first. He's nearest."

#

It wasn't far to Wesley Keshman's house, even in a slow machine like my Land Rover.

He lived on the opposite side of town from Sharkey, but you couldn't tell the two neighborhoods apart without looking at the road signs. It was a good thing we weren't planning to break into Keshman's house. He probably lived deep in the heart of Neighborhood Watch territory, too.

Lara had one of those book maps that courier drivers carry, but she hardly glanced at it. Five years of thirty-mile-an-hour patrols through little suburban hamlets had imprinted every street on her brain. Though if I know Lara, she probably bought a map and memorized the whole city on her first day.

"Turn left at that sign," she said.

We turned on to a busier street. It was lined with dozens of parked cars and vans such that when another car came in the opposite direction we had to pull off to the side and let it pass.

"It's on Keats Avenue," Lara said. "Next right, then about ten houses down on the left hand side."

I turned on to Keats and it was just as crowded, if not more. Keshman's house was number 1507, but there was no way we'd ever park near it. I was tempted to shift the Land Rover into four-wheel-drive and park her in some poor slob's flower bed, but Lara persuaded me to cruise down the road and find a spot.

There was plenty of pedestrian traffic as we walked towards the house. A few people asked us if we were looking for the Keshman house and pointed us in the right direction.

Number 1507 was like any other house on the street, save for the formally dressed people scattered about the property. Must be a wedding, I thought.

"Wesley Keshman?" I called out as we walked up the lawn.

Some people nodded. Others pointed at the front door. We

stepped inside. It was packed tighter than a stadium men's room at half-time.

"Excuse me," I said. "We're looking for Wesley Keshman."

A few astonished faces pointed us to the main living room where we met Wesley Keshman. I can't say what he looked like because the coffin was closed, but his wife assured me that the hand-rubbed mahogany casket groaning under the weight of a thousand flowers contained the remains of her dear departed husband.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Keshman," I said. "I can't imagine how you must be feeling."

I saw Lara reach for her badge, but I waved her off. I didn't spend most of my adult life as a crime reporter without learning how to smooth-talk my way into a bereaved family and walk out with a story and a nice, big photograph of the dead guy.

Mrs. Keshman was happy to talk. Her husband, she said, had been killed in a car accident just three days ago.

"The police say he was driving along the old county road, when another vehicle came the other way and forced him off the road," she said. "My Wesley wasn't drinking. They checked his blood. Not a drop."

He'd hit a crash barrier with the front end of his minivan, flipped end over end and rolled from side to side. Virtually the entire weight of the vehicle collapsed around the driver's seat. Keshman was wearing his seat belt and the air bag popped, but it wasn't enough to save him.

"What about the other car, Mrs. Keshman?" Lara asked.

"It didn't stop," she said. "It just drove away. One of the detectives told me that if it weren't for the skid marks, they would have thought Wesley just drove himself off the road."

#

"Okay, boss. Who's next?" I asked. "And we're looking for a live one this time."

Lara paged through her notebook. "Dubois is closest. But let's go see Raul Hortega, He lives on the coast and there will be traffic if we wait."

Lara gave me directions and I set about extracting my Land Rover from its parking space. The car in front had left in our absence and been replaced by a minivan parked much closer. I had to use all my driving skills to get the Land Rover out, which is to say there is now a bold strip of blue metallic paint emblazoned across my front bumper. I don't know how the minivan owner feels about the scrape, but I think my truck looks the better for it.

I wish I could say where Raul Hortega lived, but I doubt I could find the place again. Even Lara turned to her map, but it wasn't much

help. We were actually running on directions I'd found in Sharkey's address book.

Getting close wasn't a problem. We took one of the two major roads running from Boxley Cove to the coast. (Big secret here. The Chamber of Commerce doesn't let on, but Boxley Cove isn't a cove at all. It is, in fact, about thirty miles inland. The actual coast is county property.) At the coast, we joined up with a small two-laner that parallels the shore running roughly south west.

"Look out for the K&R Bait Shop," Lara said. "There's a small road running off this one."

We found the bait shop, resisted the twin siren songs "Live Worms" and "All-Day Breakfast Special \$3.99" and took the turn. The road degenerated in stages from two-lane asphalt, to one-lane gravel and eventually became little more than a pair of tire grooves worn into some thick grass. I was happy as a pig in shit.

"Good thing we took the Land Rover," I said. "This baby is in her element, right here."

"Well that's good," Lara said, smiling. "Easily makes up for the other 364 days of the year when you cruise around perfectly good paved roads in a truck that rides five feet off the ground, gets 10 miles per gallon and spews more toxic waste out its back end than Three Mile Island."

I reached down and swung my truck into four-wheel-drive. Didn't make a damned bit of difference to the ride, but I felt even better.

I've always liked the way a Land Rover goes into four-by-four. As well as the normal stick-shift, there's a fat spring-loaded green knob and a big lever topped with red handle. To hit normal four-wheel-drive you press down the green knob. To go to low-range four-wheel-drive, you haul back on the red-handled lever. Modern sport utility vehicles have little dash-mounted switches that do it all for you, but Land Rovers have always been heavy on the utility and light on the sport. I go for that. Really enhances that "macho guy at home in the jungle" image I like to project.

"Is it along here someplace?" I said, after we'd covered a good few miles. "Or do we just keep going until we get to Kenya?"

"There's a white house," Lara said, looking at Sharkey's book. "We go past that and it's the next place. Says here it's an unpainted shack with a blue mailbox on a white pole."

"The mailman goes here?"

"Apparently."

Soon enough, the white house appeared. If it was a "house" then Raul's "shack" must be little more than a backyard privy with a sitting room.

"That's it," Lara said. "Blue mailbox."

I slowed down and pulled over next to the mailbox. There didn't seem to be a house anywhere nearby. We went up the road a bit and found nothing so we came back and parked in the short grass where Raul Ortega's house should have been.

"Does Sharkey's book say exactly where the house is?"

"No. Just blue mailbox, unpainted shack."

We hopped out of the Land Rover and walked towards the water. We didn't have far to go. Unless Raul's house was hidden in the trees, we were in the wrong spot. As I looked down the beach, I spotted a figure rising up off a tree stump and walking towards us.

"Hey there," I said, as he came closer. "Raul Ortega?"

The figure turned out to be a man. He looked about fifty, but could have been younger, with the unmistakable crinkled face and vacant eyes of someone who's taken drinking a step or two too far.

"Not me," he said, perfectly lucidly. Real alcoholics are like that. They can be hammered to all shit and still carry on a conversation for hours without slurring their words. If this guy didn't smell like a vat of cheap rum, I'd swear he was as sober as Lara.

"I'm looking for Raul's house," I said. "Buddy of mine says it's about here."

"Used to be," he said. "Used to be."

Just then Lara shouted from a couple of hundred feet inland. "Rex! Look at this."

I dashed over. She was standing on a patch of ground about twenty by thirty feet. It was perfectly normal except, unlike the rest of the area, there wasn't a blade of grass on it. And it was black, charred in fact, like the inside of a barbecue after a summer's worth of backyard parties.

"Happened two, maybe three weeks ago," said the drunk, who'd walked up behind me. "Middle of the night, she just lit up in flames."

"The house?"

"Burned for hours before the fire department got here."

"What about the man who lived here?"

"Didn't have a chance," the old rummy said. "Died in his bed."

Lara and I looked at each other, but there wasn't much to say.

"So," I said, at last. "We move on."

"I guess so."

I turned to the old man. "What's a bottle go for these days?"

"Well," he said, "A really good bottle ..."

"A bottle of your usual."

"Three-fifty," he said.

I peeled off four singles, thrust them into his hand and wished him a good day.

As we walked back to the truck, Lara looked at me curiously.

"Every man's got his own time to quit," I said. "He's just not there yet."

#

Lara was quiet as we drove away. She looked pensively out the window as the sun streamed in and sparkled off her hair like one of those fashion photographer's rim lights, but nicer. I had the vent flaps open on the front of the Land Rover and the passing air blew her bangs back off her face. We were on the main road headed into town before she broke her silence.

"What's with us, Rex?" she said, at last.

"Us?"

"Us."

"I didn't think there was an 'us'," I said. "As near as I can figure it, there's a you and a me and now and again there's a you-and-me. But no us."

"That's how I see it, too," she said.

"Are you proposing that we become an 'us'?" I asked.

"No," Lara said. "I'm just wondering. Because there's definitely something there. I just wonder. That's all."

"So do I, Lara. So do I."

"I suppose we're just too different," Lara said, after a pause.

"We're not that different."

"You're kidding!" she said. "Name one thing we have in common."

"Well," I said. "There's ah Well, look, we've got Okay, I can't think of anything right now. But we're still not that different."

"We're like chalk and cheese, Rex," Lara said. "I'm a neat freak; you're messy. I'm cheap; you spend every cent you make. I've got three life insurance policies; you don't wear your seatbelt."

"This truck doesn't have seatbelts!" I exclaimed.

"That's my point," Lara said. "You drive a beat up old truck with no belts. I drive a small car with air bags."

"That's all small stuff," I said. "We can reconcile that."

"It's hard to reconcile a woman who does laundry every Saturday at 3pm with a man who, when he runs out of clean clothes, goes to the store and buys new ones."

"That's why I'm known around town as a snappy dresser," I said, moving my arm to cover the year-old sauce stain on my faded t-shirt. "Besides, I thought they said opposites attract."

"They're wrong," Lara said, wistfully. "Opposites don't attract. Opposites collide."

And on that cheerful note, we arrived at the home of accomplice number three, one Festus Dubois.

Dubois lived in a comfortable, if unremarkable, apartment building, one of three identical 8-story blocks in a comfortable, if unremarkable, neighborhood of row houses and single homes. With the exception of the residents, young families for the most part, there wasn't a thing in the entire community more than four years old. Even the trees were scraggy little saplings planted one per house in accordance with Boxley Cove's laughable building code.

There was the usual electronic door buzzer set-up in the front lobby. I tried Dubois' number a few times, but he either wasn't around or wasn't feeling social. If we had been TV private eyes, we could have buzzed any old apartment at random, yelled "pizza man" and been let in. But this was real life and in real life people don't fall for that shit. Even the dumbest apartment dweller has TV and they know all the cool PI tricks.

Inside, an elderly woman with a truly magnificent pair of legs stepped out of the elevator with one of those annoying little Yorkie dogs rich people seem to like. I eyeballed her legs big time and smiled as she opened the security door.

"Be right up, Festus," I yelled in the general direction of the intercom. I guess when you're eighty years old you don't get too many guys scoping your gams and the woman just smiled right back at me as I held open the door then slipped into the building with Lara right behind me.

We hammered on the door, but Festus Dubois was not home so we went off in search of the superintendent. I was tempted to impress my lady friend by kicking the door down and bursting in, but Lara spends all day surrounded by big, tough cops. I reckon I'm more likely to win her heart by showing my deep, sensitive side. Besides, kicking doors can hurt your toes.

The superintendent was a retired army major who didn't mind collecting checks and calling the occasional plumber in return for a break on his rent.

"I haven't seen Mr. Dubois in nearly a month," he said. "He owes me a rent check."

"Is it unusual for him to be gone for a long time?"

"Oh yes," the super said. "He's a businessman and his work calls him away. But it's usually just a couple of days, a week at most. And he's never been late with his rent in the two years he's been with us."

"So he owes you ...?"

"Eight hundred and fifty dollars," the super said. "Plus fifty a week late charges. Are you a friend of Mr. Dubois?"

"No," I said. "He owes me money. I'm looking for him too."

"If you find him, would you remind him about the rent?"

"I'll do that," I said. "But right now, it's not looking good. I've

exhausted all my leads. Maybe if I took a quick look around the apartment, I'd be able to pick up the trail."

"Oh," the superintendent said. "I don't know about that."

"Figure it this way," I said. "Festus Dubois hasn't paid his rent. So this apartment is no longer his. It belongs to the owners and as the officially appointed representative of the owners you are legally authorized to allow me access."

"I guess you're right," he said, pulling out a ring of keys. "Just don't take anything."

Talk about persuasive. I should sell used cars for a living.

#

Standard apartment. Two bedrooms, one big, one small. Massive kitchen. Big bathroom. Off-white walls. Whiter appliances. Beige carpet. All the personality of dry toast and warm water. We could have been anywhere in the country.

Everything in the place was equally bland. The furnishings were your basic Sears. Top-of-the-line Sears, mind you, but Sears nonetheless. There were seven framed pictures on the walls, all copies of old masters with the name of the artist beneath in all-caps, 80-point Helvetica bold.

I checked the closets and drawers. Whaddaya know, Sears clothes. Casual cotton pants, golf shirts, three suits, a motley collection of shoes, lots of socks and some really dumb looking boxer shorts. There were no gaping holes where he might have packed a bag before disappearing.

A plain-looking desk held a couple of blank notepads and a calendar without anything written on it. There was nothing in the drawers but more notepads, a bunch of ball-point pens and a couple of magic markers.

There was plenty of food in the kitchen, but it was all stuff in cans or bottles. There wasn't anything that could spoil. No veggies or milk. Nothing open. You could come back in a hundred years and not smell a thing.

The superintendent followed me around like a puppy dog while I rifled drawers, tapped the walls for secret hidy-holes and flipped seat cushions. I even popped the top off the toilet tank and checked the plunger float on the off chance old Festus got his concealment tips from watching re-runs of McCloud. "What are you looking for?" the super said.

"Leads."

"Find any?"

"Not yet," I said. And I never did.

#

"He's dead," I said to Lara, when we got back into the Land Rover.

"How do you know?"

"The other two turned up dead," I said. "Dubois is missing and somebody has been through his place."

"I see what you mean about Keshman and Hortega," Lara said. "It's a bit much to be a coincidence. But that apartment looked okay to me."

"Oh, it looked fine," I said. "Too fine. That's the problem. There wasn't a single piece of personal stuff in the entire place. No letters. No credit card bills. Not even an old shopping list. Nobody lives like that?"

"Maybe Festus Dubois is just a tidy guy."

"Who's that tidy?"

"Well not you, that's for sure," Lara said, laughing.

"Not anybody," I said. "At least, not anybody who's still alive."

#

We left the final name on our list for the following day. Jefferson Dellavista lived a good hundred miles north of Boxley Cove and neither of us was up for two hours of bucking and bouncing in my Land Rover. Besides, the way things were going Dellavista was pretty sure to be dead too. We were just making the trip out of morbid curiosity to find out exactly how he died.

So, of course, he turned out to be alive.

Dellavista lived in a big old southern mansion near the outer edges of the Apalachicola National Forest. It looked like something out of *Gone With The Wind*, which is sort of appropriate for this part of the state. Up here on the Panhandle we're a lot more Deep South than South Florida, though try telling that to the tourists who wonder why we don't all speak Spanish and hate Castro.

If a man was ever perfectly suited to his house, it was Jefferson Dellavista. He was a tall, black gentleman in his late fifties, I guessed, with salt-and-pepper hair, a bright bow-tie and a twinkle in his eye that darned near swept Lara right off her feet.

"You're alive," I blurted out after he answered the door and told us who he was.

"Yes, I'm happy to say," he replied, in a voice that made James Earl Jones sound squeaky. "I do hope you're not here to change that."

Once assured that Lara and I were not a pair of assassins out-a-killing, Dellavista led us into the house. Like its owner, the place was

getting on in years but still showed evidence of good breeding.

"It's very quiet," Lara said. "Is everyone out?"

"There's no one else," he said. "I live alone. May I offer you coffee? Tea? Perhaps something a touch more potent?"

We chose coffee and Dellavista disappeared, presumably to the kitchen.

"I do hope he doesn't turn out to be a bad guy," Lara whispered. "I love him already."

When Dellavista returned with a cup of coffee each for Lara and me and a glass of red wine for himself, we told him why we'd come. He'd been out of town for three weeks, hadn't heard anything about the death of Sharkey or his pals and was shocked when we told him.

"If some disreputable character is killing Sharkey's friends I'll take immediate precautions" he said. "I'll certainly lock the front door and check the windows before I retire for the evening. Maybe leave a light on to discourage the ruffians."

"Really, sir, I don't think that's going to be enough," I said. "We don't know who's doing this. But whoever they are, I don't think they'll stop at your front door."

"I'm an old man, Mr. Fowler," he said. "It's a bit late in the day for me to start carrying a gun and putting bars on my windows. What would you do in my place?"

"Maybe the best you can do would be to help us find these people," Lara said. "What can you tell us about Sharkey? You were his friend, weren't you?"

"Well, we worked together."

"You were in on his con games?" I said, with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop.

"Mr. Drysdale and I were involved in certain projects of a speculative nature," he said in his courtly way. "Our enterprises were designed to appeal to the more adventurous investor."

"So what was Sharkey working on recently?"

"Oh it was a very exciting venture involving Spanish galleons and sunken treasure," he said. "An altogether strange business."

"Strange?" Lara said. "How so?"

"It was terribly elaborate. Much more so than it needed to be. Very odd, indeed."

"I don't understand. Aren't these things always elaborate?"

"No, not really," Dellavista said. "They look terribly grand from the outside, but most are quite simple really. There's usually a big production number very early in the project. It helps build credibility. After that, though, it's mostly just, how would you say it, smoke and mirrors."

"But not this time?"

"Goodness no!" Dellavista answered. He stood up, glided across the room until he was framed by a huge front window, and spread his arms expansively. I could see why Sharkey would want a man like that on his team. His stately manner oozed credibility while his soothing voice and irrepressible charm left you hanging on his every word.

He said, "It was the grandest project I have ever seen and, appearances to the contrary, I am not a young man. Every aspect of the venture was authentic. It looked like one of those Hollywood extravaganzas with Sharkey Drysdale as Cecil B. DeMille."

"Why?" I said. "What was the point?"

"Sharkey told me his client was much harder to impress than most," Dellavista said. "So he had to make things look perfect. I, naturally, suggested he select a more flexible client, but he seemed determined."

"Do you know what it all cost?" Lara asked.

"No," he said. "A huge amount of money, though. Maybe everything Sharkey had. It probably would have cost less to actually go out and find a real sunken galleon than to run that game."

That cinched it for me. Sitting in that big old house, listening to Jefferson Dellavista, I thought to myself - that galleon is for real.

"You don't know who the 'client' was, do you?" I asked, but Dellavista said nothing.

I heard the breaking of fine glass as he dropped his wine. I looked up, but the crystal goblet was still in his hand. He stayed there, frozen, with that arresting half-smile on his face for about five seconds before he crumpled to the floor.

I sprung up and looked past him to the window. The bullet had shattered a small pane of glass before entering Jefferson Dellavista's body just inches to the right of his heart. That, not the wineglass, was what I'd heard.

"Jesus Christ, Lara," I said, feeling the man's carotid artery for a pulse that wasn't there. "They've shot him."

#

Lara and I ran out and made to jump in the Land Rover. The bad guys were too far gone for us to see what they were driving. Anything faster than a motorized rickshaw and we'd never keep up, but you've got to try.

We approached the truck and both noticed the two flat front tires at the same time.

"Shit!" I yelled. "I am really starting to get tired of this."

I wrenched open the driver's door, reached under the dash and hauled out the 9mm Browning Hi-Power I keep under there. It's an old

Canadian Army surplus piece with a dubious history, but it's my kind of gun. These days, everybody's crazy about those 18-round H&Ks and plastic composite Glocks, but I'll stick with my all-steel Browning. It'll take a beating and still do what it's supposed to. And if you run out of bullets, it makes a pretty fair club.

By the time I got it in my hand, the bad boys were well out of range. I aimed at the dust cloud they'd raised on the way out, considered blasting off a few rounds just for the hell of it, but decided not to.

"Well, well," Lara said, looking at my gun. "Rex, I hope you've got a permit for that."

"Absolutely, Officer," I lied. "But it's in my other suit."

"Then put that thing away before I see it."

I slid the weapon back into the leather holster I keep velcroed under the dash and walked around to the front of the truck to inspect the damage.

"Damn," I said. "Those were brand-new valve stems, too."

Lara reached into the truck and pulled out my cell phone. It was dead.

"There must be phone in the house."

"Better be," I said. "Or we're in for a long walk home."

There was a phone in the living room and we made all the right calls. It didn't take the tow-truck guys long to get us mobile again and the paramedics were almost as fast, but by the time we got through lying to the State Police uniforms, then repeating the same lies to the homicide detectives, the day was a write-off.

The lead investigator, a middle-aged guy named Harris, didn't figure we'd killed Dellavista. Lara's badge took care of that. But he was pretty sure we knew more than we were willing to admit. If Lara had worked for any other force, I'm sure Harris would have put in a friendly call to her chief and she'd have been forced to explain what she was doing sipping coffee with a murder victim. But the state cops know what a jerk-off Flockett is and they weren't about to make his life any easier if they could help it.

"We should have come clean with that detective," Lara said on the drive back to Boxley Cove.

"And tell him what?" I said.

"What we know."

"We told him Dellavista got shot," I said. "I told Flockett that Sharkey was killed and he didn't believe me. As for the other two, Wesley Keshman had a car accident and Festus Dubois's house burned down."

"You don't really believe the car crash and the fire were accidents?"

"No," I said. "But, so far, we've got nothing to tell the cops."
"You seem to forget, I am the cops," Lara said.
"So what do we do?" I said. "How do you want to play this?"
Lara thought for a moment. "We figure it out," she said. "We find out what's going on. Then we turn it over to the detectives."

CHAPTER 5

By the time we got back to Boxley Cove it was past sunset. Neither one of us was tired and we were too pumped up to leave things until morning. We decided to take a closer look at Sharkey Drysdale's notes. If for no other reason, it was the only lead we had left.

Back at my place, I put on some coffee, dumped a tupperware full of lasagna into a pan and set about warming it up.

The lasagna had a dubious provenance. About a month previous, I'd taken out a group of five United Airlines flight attendants who were spending their two-week holiday down here on the Panhandle. After the day-sail, one of them, a twenty-something Italian girl named Carla Angellozzi, decided my place was far more comfortable than a shared room at the local Holiday Inn and moved in with me for the duration. As bed partners go she was nothing to write home about, but, oh-my-god that woman could cook. She spent the week hopping from the bedroom to the kitchen and when she left I found a month's worth of pasta dishes in little plastic containers in my freezer. The lasagna was the last one left. I'm either going to have to learn to cook or start flying United until I find that girl.

While I was heating up supper, Lara Travis set to work sorting out the huge mass of papers I'd taken from Sharkey's place. I had just dumped everything on my couch, but by the time I'd made the coffee and heated up the pasta, Lara had been through everything and arranged it all in neat little piles around my coffee table, all carefully organized alphabetically by subject. Like I said, she's tidy; I'm a slob. Opposites collide.

"So what have we got?" I said, carrying in two mis-matched plates piled high with Carla's cooking.

"A lot of general information about finding sunken treasure," Lara said. "Your friend Sharkey could have written a book about Spanish galleons and how to recover them."

"Maybe that's it," I said, with little conviction. "He's writing a book."

"I doubt it," Lara said. "But he's got plenty of stuff in here. Sailing routes to and from Spain. Locations of silver and gold mines. Maps with known wrecks plotted. And technical stuff, about sonars and

magnetometers and things like that."

"Very interesting if you're Jacques Cousteau," I said. "But kind of vague, don't you think."

"That stuff is," Lara said. "But two things stand out. There's a Spanish ship called the Santa Castillo and an English privateer named Neptune's Grace."

"Privateer?"

"Sort of a pirate ship," Lara said. "But with a charter from the king."

"I don't get it," I said. "What's a charter?"

"Queen Elizabeth the First started it," Lara said. "You ever hear of Sir Francis Drake?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "The Armada."

"Well, yes," Lara said. "But Drake was also a privateer. The Queen gave him Letters of Marque, sort of like a permission slip."

"To be a pirate?"

"Not exactly," Lara said. "Permission to attack the enemies of England, one of which was Spain. It was really an official sanction to go plundering. In return, the privateer turned over a chunk of his takings to the Queen."

"And the Queen gave one of these Letters of Marque to this Neptune's Grace?" I asked.

"Not the Queen," Lara said. "She just invented the idea. Neptune's Grace actually got her letters from King James the First. He came after Elizabeth, but it's the same thing."

"All that is in Sharkey's notes?" I asked.

"Not all of it," she said. "They had this show about pirates and privateers on A&E and I watched it with Bobby. He's been reading Treasure Island so he's all into that stuff."

Lara picked up one of Sharkey's notebooks and began reading to herself. I shuffled a couple of the maps around and looked at a few pictures. I had no idea what I was looking for, but I knew better than to disturb Lara.

"Hmmm?," Lara said, furrowing her brow.

"What?"

She just kept reading. And furrowing. And reading some more. And more furrowing. Eventually she turned to me.

"It's not exactly clear," she said.

"Certainly not to me," I said. "What have you got?"

"Bits and pieces," she said. "It's like a big puzzle and someone's removed two or three important pieces. There's a huge amount of detail on the galleon and the privateer. You could almost build the Santa Castillo and the Neptune's Grace from the keel up with what's in these notebooks. And there's a location, but he doesn't say what's

there."

"The galleon, presumably."

"I think so," Lara said. "He's got a copy of the manifest and it looks like a fortune. But why all the fuss about a British privateer if he was looking for a Spanish ship?"

"Maybe the privateer sank the galleon?"

"That wouldn't make sense," Lara said. "They'd take it as a prize."

"You say there's a location," I said. "Let's just sail out, go for a dive and see what's down there."

"Not so easy," Lara said. "The location isn't exactly clear either."

Lara explained that documents from 1622 indicated the wreck as being located at "100 miles southwest of the southernmost point," but gave no indication as to what the southernmost point was. The range and bearing, she said, have been common knowledge amongst treasure hunters for years. Dozens of would-be explorers had lost their shirts trying to find it.

"It seems easy," Lara said. "Just point your boat southwest, race out a hundred miles and you're rich. But the \$64,000 question is 'where do you start from?' Is it the tip of Florida? Or one of the Keys? Or what about the Tortugas? It could be anywhere in South Florida. Nobody knows."

"Except Sharkey Drysdale," I said. "And he's not telling."

Lara had her head buried in one of the notebooks. After more reading and brow furrowing she said, "Maybe he is."

She slid the book over and pointed to a carefully handwritten line of text. It was printed in red ink and highlighted with one of those awful florescent pink markers that students use to ruin their textbooks. It said, "M.M.H. 451.77623."

"Any idea what that is?"

"Phone number?" I guessed. "Latitude and longitude? Winning lottery number? Could be anything."

"Worth looking into, though," Lara said.

"Yeah," I said, laughing. "I'll call A&E. Maybe they know."

We went through the rest of Sharkey's notes. There was plenty more stuff about ships and gold and silver. After a while, it started to get boring. Rather like A&E, come to think of it. I read for an hour before I found something.

"The Great Panhandle Exploration Company," I said. "Ever hear of it?"

"No," Lara answered. "You?"

"No," I said. "But it's got Sharkey Drysdale written all over it. I'll run up to Tallahassee and check it out."

"Now?" Lara said. It was nearly eleven o'clock.

"No" I said. "First thing tomorrow morning."

"First thing?"

"First thing after I make you breakfast," I said, with what I hoped was a seductive smile.

Lara shook her head. "No," she said, with what may have been a hint of regret. "Not tonight. I'm on day shift tomorrow."

"Worth a try, though," I said. "Drive you home?"

"You can do that" Lara Travis said, making a better job than me of a seductive grin. "And I'll take a rain-check on that breakfast."

#

It was just as well I'd decided to drive up to the state capital and see what I could find out about the Great Panhandle Exploration Company because my landlord Charlie Gannon called me first thing the next morning.

"Rex," he said, cheerfully on the phone. "Got a busy day, do you?"

"If you mean am I going to be out, the answer is yes," I said.

"Good, good," he said. "Thought I'd drop by for a coupla hours."

He must be interviewing secretaries again. "Wife know about this, Charlie?"

"It's no big deal, Rex," Charlie said. "I'm just planning to come over and check the place out. You know, make sure the house is in good shape, see if there are any repairs that need doing."

"No problem, Charlie," I said. "I'll be gone all day."

"Great, great. Appreciate this."

"Don't mention it," I said. "Oh, and Charlie ..."

"Yeah?"

"When you're all finished making sure my house is in good repair and everything's ship-shape, would you mind tossing the sheets in the washing machine?"

#

It was a nice day for a drive. I pulled off the Land Rover's canvas top and stowed it in the house, popped open the two air vents below the windshield, slid a Eurythmics greatest hits tape in my (remarkably not-yet-stolen) cassette player and guided my beat-up old truck onto the highway.

My Land Rover is only marginally faster than highway road-kill and everything passed me. I didn't care. There's something about cruising along in the world's toughest four-by-four that makes me feel like a character in a Wilbur Smith novel. I felt like Sean Courtney crossing the Zambezi after a herd of springbok. You just don't get that feeling in a minivan.

Tallahassee is only 25 miles from the Georgia state line and it's oozing with that Deep South feel that makes the Panhandle so much nicer than the rest of Florida.

The state registry office, naturally, was completely devoid of southern charm. It looked like it had been designed by the same architect who crafted the cafeteria at K-mart. Why does every government building have to look like a maximum security prison? Personally, I'd happily pay a few extra percentage points in taxes if the state would use the cash to beautify its offices. Of course, I haven't actually paid taxes in years, but my point's the same.

The staff, on the other hand, was everything you could want in a civil service, and more.

"Howdy," said the bleached blond woman at the counter. "What's your name?"

"Rex Fowler."

"Well, hi ya, Rex," she said, sliding her left hand forward so I could see it held no ring. "Maah name is Miss Rhonda Williams." Heavy accent on the "Miss."

"Hello, Rhonda"

"Hah can ahh hep you?"

I handed her a slip of paper with the name "Great Panhandle Exploration Company" written on it and said I wanted to see the public record. Every state-incorporated firm has to file documents with the registry office. Anyone can get a copy.

"That's a twenty dollar fee, Rex," Miss Williams said. "We accept Visa and MasterCard."

I slid a twenty across the counter. Rhonda (hey, we're on a first name basis) punched the name into her computer and waited.

"You from Tallahassee, Rex?" Rhonda said.

"No," I said, handing her my business card. "The Gulf Coast."

"Real nice down there," she said. "In town long? I finish at five."

I said I'd be gone before that and she sighed. Her printer spat out three pages of text which she placed carefully in my hand.

"Boxley Cove," Rhonda said, reading my card. "Are they all as cute as you down there?"

I leaned forward on the counter and looked as deep as I could into her eyes. "Truly, Rhonda," I said in my deepest FM-radio voice. "Just between you and me, Boxley Cove is a throbbing hot-bed of devastatingly handsome single men. Down there, I'm reckoned to be one of the ugly ones."

As I left the building, Rhonda Williams was still sighing.

I hopped back in the Land Rover and shoved the Eurythmics tape back in the machine. Annie Lennox needs a man. I'm available. Once again, irony rears its ugly head.

There wasn't a lot to the Great Panhandle Exploration Company's incorporation documents. Headquarters were located at Sharkey Drysdale's home address. Market capitalization was next to nothing. The good stuff was on page two.

Sharkey was listed as president and chief executive officer, which didn't surprise me at all. But the list of corporate directors was interesting. They were:

Wesley Keshman,
Raul Hortege,
Festus Dubois,
Jefferson Dellavista and
Nelson Ardley.

The last name left me confused. I knew the first four, all associates of Sharkey Drysdale and all recently deceased. The name Nelson Ardley rang a bell, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

I spied a Starbucks down the block and treated myself to a large Kenyan Dark Roast. The girl at the counter was careful to remind me that "large" is pronounced "grande" in Starbuck-speak and to tell me that coffee is hot, on the off-chance I was planning to pour it over my head. How a company gets to be so successful by treating its customers like morons is beyond my understanding. Maybe everybody is like that in Seattle.

I watched out the coffee shop window as two identical Nissan Pathfinders from a local TV news show pulled into the parking lot. They were both painted a garish bright orange with "News Squad 7 - Live. Local. On The Scene." splashed across the side.

A plain girl made up to look pretty and wearing a cotton mini skirt the approximate size of a postage stamp walked self-importantly into the store and left minutes later with two trays of java to go.

As I watched her hand out coffee to the rest of the "squad," something clicked in my brain. TV, that's where I'd heard the name Nelson Ardley. He was the judge who walked that mob boss Vittorio Gannachetti. He'd been all over the news for weeks.

But that didn't explain what he was doing mixed up with Sharkey Drysdale. It didn't tell me how he came to be involved with the Great Panhandle Exploration Company. And it didn't tell me why he was the only board member who wasn't dead.

I was time I found out a bit more about Judge Nelson "Hard Case" Ardley.

"God-damned college kids," Finbar "Flats" O'Flaherty, city editor on the Panhandle Times-Register, cursed. "See what you left me to deal with, Fowler."

O'Flaherty sat hunched in his chair, a unlit cigarette bouncing around his mouth, staring at his computer screen and cursing.

From what I could see, the story, by some reporter I'd never heard of named Denise Matthews, concerned allegations of corruption against a city councilor. The story led by saying an extensive investigation had turned up no evidence against the man. It was dull stuff.

"Matthews!" he yelled. "Get the fuck over here." A petite redhead with functional hair and genius-IQ glasses stood up and walked towards us. Every other reporter in the room looked up, but no one said anything.

"Before I get my good friend Rex Fowler to fix up this piece of crap," O'Flaherty said, in his inimitably charming way. "Why don't you tell me why this story stinks?"

"I don't know," she said, eyes firmly fixed on the ground. "We investigated and so did the police and neither of us came up with anything. As far as we can tell, he's a completely honest man."

"Fucking useless, Matthews," he said. "God-damned fucking useless. Fowler, show her how it's done."

I looked around the newsroom. Everybody knew what was going on. Newsrooms in real life are nothing like the bustling madhouses you see at the movies. They're quiet as libraries and about as exciting. The T-R city room was filled with serious-looking reporters hunched over keyboards. But they weren't writing. They were listening to O'Flaherty tear a strip off this poor girl. A few of them would sidle up to her later and try to buck up her spirits, but right now, nobody was about to stand up O'Flaherty.

I took a quick glance at the screen, slid my hands over to the keyboard and began to type. "Councilor Barstow yesterday refused to comment on speculation he may have been involved in a wide-ranging conspiracy to defraud the city of up to \$5-million," I wrote. "Barstow, whose name has been linked publicly with alleged mobster Manny Rebar, has kept a low profile following allegations of high-level corruption. Police officials, who have been keeping Barstow under close scrutiny, say"

I went on in that vein for a few more minutes until O'Flaherty pushed me out of the way so Denise Matthews could see what I'd done.

"That," he said, tapping the screen with the wet end of his

cigarette, "is how we write a news story."

That, actually, was how we ruin the career of a fairly decent young politician, but I left it alone. Worrying about things like that can turn a man to drink. O'Flaherty picked up his coat and waved his hand across the newsroom.

"Let's leave these useless fuckers to mess up my newspaper," he said. "We'll find ourselves a nice comfortable bar and I'll tell you what I know about that judge."

#

"Let's have a big round of applause and welcome on stage the beautiful Felicia!" the DJ hollered over the first few bars of Donna Summer's Hot Stuff. "And remember gentlemen, all our lovely ladies are available for your private dancing pleasure in one of our VIP Champagne Rooms. Just ten dollars a song. All you have to do is ask."

O'Flaherty's idea of a nice comfortable bar was The Beaver Lodge, a stripper club sandwiched between two vacant warehouses in Boxley Cove's only industrial park. As nudie bars go, it's definitely the last stop on the exotic dancer career track. The girls who work the place have all been at it for years, hopping downwards from bar to bar to bar as their looks fade and their body begins to sag. For most of them, The Beaver Lodge is just a way-station on the inevitable road to cruising the streets selling \$20 blowjobs.

The bar itself is just as seedy. It's huge, but never gets more than a third full. The carpet and the wallpaper both started off as a rich shade of burgundy, but now the floor looks like a mix of cheese whiz and cigarette ash while the walls are a uniform shade of dirty gray. The whole place feels as if it's covered with a thin film of oil and sweat mostly because ... well, it is.

"Ahh, home at last," Finbar O'Flaherty said as we walked in. "Have you been here before?"

"Only with you," I said. "It's a bit off my normal path."

"Yeah," O'Flaherty said. "Sort of a hidden gem."

More like a hidden germ, but I let it pass. The waitress, an eighty-year-old woman with perky cheerleader breasts made entirely of silicon, arrived with a double scotch and a Heineken for Flats and took my order for a Coke.

O'Flaherty downed the scotch with two quick gulps and set to work on his beer. "So what the hell's going on that you need my help?" he asked, signaling for another round.

I gave him the abridged version with most of the juicy details removed. The last thing I needed was to see the Sharkey Drysdale story turn up city front above the fold in tomorrow's Times-Register.

"That's fucking amazing!" O'Flaherty said.

"Ardley?"

"No," he said, looking hard at the dimly lit stage. "That Felicia. If I didn't know better, I'd swear those boobs were real!"

"Flats," I said. "I need your help here."

"All right," he said. "Hard Case Ardley. Not much to say. A real old fashioned hangin' judge. Sort of guy who chews nails and spits rust. Must be the meanest judge in the state. Cops love him, but public defenders will kill their own kids to get out of his courtroom."

"What about his private life?" I asked. "Is he for sale?"

"No," O'Flaherty said. "He's a real straight arrow. Last of the boy scouts."

"He's never taken money?"

"Not that anyone's ever heard of," he said. "He seems to live on his salary."

"Maybe he just stashes it," I said. "Maybe he's got millions in the Caymans or something."

"I doubt it," O'Flaherty said. "I've seen plenty of guys take money and sooner or later it shows. Something turns up - broads, gambling, dope, cars, whatever. There's always something if you look."

"But nothing with Ardley?"

"Naahh," he said. "He's got a little house up in Tallahassee, drives a three-year-old Chevy, and I don't think he's ever been to Vegas."

"Family?"

"One kid, grown up. Lives somewhere in upstate New York. Wife died about three years ago. They used to travel a bit, but now the judge just stays home and builds his little ships."

"What?"

"He's some kind of sailing ship freak," O'Flaherty said, slurping back the last few drops of Heineken number two and looking around for the waitress. "He builds these scale models. Right out of Mutiny on the Bounty. They're kinda neat looking, in a way. Not that I'd wanna waste my time on that shit."

O'Flaherty's drinks arrived and I was relieved when he didn't attack them at the same blistering pace as he'd downed the others. Flats sees himself as one of those guys who's born a couple of drinks short. Once he tops himself up, so to speak, he's happy to pace himself for a while. It meant we could talk for a time without me worrying about him lapsing into a coma.

I pumped him some more about the sailing ships, but he didn't know much. He'd only been to the judge's house once and hadn't paid much attention to his models. They could have been Spanish galleons, he said, or English privateers. Of course, they could also have been perfect replicas of the Love Boat complete with anatomically correct

Captain Stubing action figures.

"I didn't really look at them," O'Flaherty said. "I just followed him around, nodding and smiling while he blathered on about deep sea diving and treasure hunting."

"Treasure?" I said. "He definitely said treasure?"

"Oh, did he ever," O'Flaherty said. "The old judge figures the Gulf is full of the stuff. Me, I reckon it's all just a big con for the tourists."

#

Felicia had finished her set (two fast dance numbers, a break, then a slow song) and disappeared into one of The Beaver Lodge's grimy "Champagne Rooms" with a slightly drunk fellow who couldn't have been much more than sixteen. The club's owners have long ago figured out it's easier to hand out free beer to passing cops and slip Chief Flockett a few hundred each month than to turn away underage customers. As a result, The Beaver Lodge is a popular hot spot amongst Boxley Cove's horny high schooler crowd.

O'Flaherty seemed to be enjoying the show. His eyes were glued to the stage where Tiffany or Kimberly or Cassandra or Amber or some other improbably named dancer who looked like she'd been ridden hard and put away wet was doing things to a beer bottle that seemed to defy the laws of physics.

"It's not just a strip show," Flats gasped in amazement as the label came clean off the bottle and disappeared from view. "It's a complete theatrical performance."

"She's quite a woman," I said.

"Speaking of women, Fowler."

"What?"

"What's going on with ace reporter Rex Fowler and Boxley Cove's most eligible police officer?" he said. "Doing a little volunteer work with Crime Stoppers, are we?"

I mumbled some lame crap about Lara and I being just friends and her helping me with the Drysdale case which seemed to get me off the hook.

"Can't figure that girl," O'Flaherty said. "Something weird there."

"Lara?" I said. "She's the least weird person I know. If anything, she's too normal."

"No, no. Not like that," he said. "What I can't work out is what she's doing here."

"She's a cop."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "What she do, five, six years LAPD? Then she transfers out here. It doesn't wash."

I had no idea what O'Flaherty was talking about. The Boxley Cove

Police Department was made up, almost entirely, of cops from big city forces. If Lara was an oddball, the whole department was suspicious.

"Look at who we get joining the BCPD," O'Flaherty said when I quizzed him. "We get cops with two years on a big force. They can't take the heat so they move out here. And we get old guys who retire on a pension and don't want to quit the job. And then on top of that we get the fuckups."

"So where does Lara Travis fit in to all that?"

"That's it. She doesn't," O'Flaherty said. "She puts in six years on the LA force, a real good cop from what I hear. Then she just pulls up and moves out here? You don't do that without a good reason."

"Maybe she came out here looking for a nice guy like me?" I said, chuckling.

"Oh, sure. That's it." O'Flaherty said, pointing to the stage. "And maybe Tiffany up there is really an off-duty nun working her way through bible college."

CHAPTER 6

Somebody once told me that if you're looking for a job you should ask every single person you meet if they know of an opening. No matter what you're looking for, they'd said, you're never far from someone who can help you. It's a good piece of advice and, as a guy whose drinking habits often left him scrambling about in search of gainful employment, I used it often.

I put the same technique to work trying to figure out what that mysterious "M.M.H. 451.77623" notation we'd found in Sharkey Drysdale's notebook meant.

I'd tried to figure it out on my own. It was too long for a phone number and too short for a social security number. Given that this whole business seemed to revolve around sunken treasure, latitude and longitude seemed a good bet. I checked some of my charts but Florida is in the area of latitude 25 degrees north and longitude 82 degrees west, which was no help. A library atlas wasn't much more use. I plotted 451.77623 as a latitude and longitude on a map of the world and found my finger pointing at Ottawa, Canada, a difficult place to get a ship to and an even harder place to sink one.

Everybody had some idea what M.M.H. 451.77623 could be.

My landlord, Charlie Gannon, figured it was an account number from a Swiss bank and wanted to know if I'd be flying over to Europe to check it out and, if so, could he use my house while I was gone.

Farley Morris, who works the pier where I dock NewsHound, changed each of the numbers to a letter, came up with "dea.ggfbc" and seemed to think that would be incredibly helpful. I said if his tip

paid off I'd give him a big reward.

The socially-inept young man who works the self-serve where I buy gas was convinced I'd got my hands on an "alien communications link cryptographic algorithm." He copied the numbers down on the back of his X-Files fan magazine and promised to "check it out with the boys at Roswell."

So much for asking everyone you know. I'd have been better off looking for a job.

Eventually, it was a customer who solved the riddle.

I had a really nice family down for a day sail - a history professor from my home state of Montana, his second wife and two kids, one from each marriage. Exactly the sort of folks I had in mind when I bought the boat. They'd come down to the Panhandle for a week in Panama City Beach under the mistaken impression it was an unspoiled little hideaway. When they found out how cheesy, over-crowded and filled with drunks it is, they canceled their hotel reservations, rented a car and decided to spend their vacation driving along the coast in search of "places that don't make their entire living selling t-shirts." My kind of people.

I almost didn't ask about the number. I'd pretty much given up on it and was getting tired of listening to wacky theories from the lunatic fringe. But my guests (when I really like people, I call them guests rather than customers) seemed normal enough, so I gave it a shot.

We were sitting around the quarter-deck yakking about this and that and working our way through a tray of sandwiches I'd made from a loaf of Hettie Jenkins's home-made bread.

Hettie must be eighty years old, though she doesn't look a day over, well ... eighty, actually. Her eyesight's poor and she doesn't drive so, once or twice a month, I run her into town so she can do some shopping, pick up a few large-print mystery novels at the library and have a cup of tea and a gossip with her friends, most of whom gave up their own houses years ago and moved into the retirement lodge. In return, she gives me jars of her home-made pickles, which are simply too awful to eat, and loaves of her light-rye bread, the taste of which is, as one rapturous customer put it after a few bites, "irrefutable proof of the existence of God."

My guests (Dennis Beckman and family, not that it matters) weren't quite so enchanted, but they enjoyed the sandwiches. When Mrs. Beckman and the kids slid over the side for bit of swimming and cavorting, I went down below to get a beer for Dennis and a soda for me. I spied one of my old reporter's notebooks on the counter and picked it up on my way topside.

"This is a long-shot," I said, flipping open the book and showing him the numbers. "But do you have any idea what this means?"

Beckman knew right way. "It's a reference number," he said, "from the Museum of Maritime History."

That was easy. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure," he said. "It's in Washington. I've done quite a bit of research work there."

"So what's at this museum?" I asked. "Old ships? Things like that?"

"Not really," he said. "There are some artifacts, but it's mostly photographs and documents. It's not the sort of place tourists visit."

"So you have to be a professor to get in?"

"Oh, no," Beckman said. "Researchers use the place, but it's open to the public. It wouldn't be very exciting, but you could go there if you wanted to."

So I did.

#

Dennis Beckman was right about the Museum of Maritime History. There wasn't a lot for the average tourist to see. Aside from an old anchor propped up in the main lobby, it was just a big room filled with tables and chairs. A counter ran along the room with stacks of boxes and rows of books shelved behind.

I gave the woman a piece of paper with M.M.H. 451.77623 carefully printed on it. I had no idea what I'd get in return. I was secretly hoping for a slightly yellowed but still readable treasure map with a big red "X" marking a spot somewhere near my house.

What I got was a box filled with papers. M.M.H. 451.77623 was actually an assigned number representing a whole collection of documents. The museum does that to make it easy for researchers who return day after day to look at the same things. When I gave the desk clerk the number, she just punched it into a computer which told her exactly what files to retrieve.

None of the documents in the box were even slightly yellowed. They weren't even old. The clerk explained that they only lend photocopies. It's less romantic, but it keeps the collection from decaying and prevents theft. Personally, I wouldn't mind a little decay and theft, but then I'm a romantic living in a rational world so what do I know.

I spent two full days in Washington reading through the papers Sharkey Drysdale had uncovered, staring at old drawings and tracing courses on copies of old navigation charts. The time passed like it was mere minutes.

When I was a boy, I read and re-read all eleven of the Horatio Hornblower adventure novels. While my friends were running about

the neighborhood and playing ball, I was up in my room devouring the exciting exploits of C.S. Forester's naval hero. All I wanted out of life was to grow up and spend my days on a swaying deck yelling "Back the mizzen topsail! Beat to quarters and clear for action!" while hearty lads scampered about the rigging. Alas, it was not to be. There's very little rigging on NewsHound, the deck doesn't sway much, and few of my customers are willing to scamper.

I've still got my old Hornblower books and even today they send my blood racing. But the story Sharkey Drysdale uncovered was more thrilling than anything old Cecil Scott ever dreamt up.

#

Not much is known about a Spanish galleon named the Santa Castillo. We do know that she was a four-master with the familiar high poop deck that makes galleons so instantly recognizable. She was owned by a group of merchants from Seville and was one of 28 ships that left the port of Cadiz in 1622, bound for the New World where gold and silver lay waiting for shipment.

It wasn't the best time to be hauling treasure. For one thing, there wasn't as much of it as there used to be. And with the Thirty Years War well under way, resources were stretched to the limit. As well, Spain was in a general decline as England and Holland began to take her place as world powers.

The captain's name is lost to history as is any accurate description of the ship or her crew. But galleons were generally in poor shape, skippered by some of the least competent commanders around and crewed by unwilling, unskilled crews. Those paintings of proud, ship-shape galleons racing across the ocean make the whole business look like rollicking good fun. Reality, as it usually is, was rather more grim. There's no reason to think the Santa Castillo was any different.

The ship set out from Cadiz, took on fresh water and supplies in the Azores, then headed south along what was basically Ferdinand Magellan's route. The ballast-laden vessel moved southwards, passing the Cape Verde islands then skirting the coast of what we today call South America.

A Panama Canal would have made life much easier, but it hadn't been built yet. Nor had the much-sought Northwest Passage been found, mainly because it doesn't actually exist.

So, like hundreds of tiny craft before her (she was certainly no more than a couple of hundred feet long), the Santa Castillo braved the fury of the seas and rounded the tip of the continent at the infamous Cape Horn. No one knows whether she enjoyed a rare calm passage or suffered a storm, but whatever happened down there, she

came out the other side and set course for the region now known as Columbia, Ecuador and Peru.

Hopping along the coast, the Santa Castillo's ballast was quickly exchanged for 47 tons of precious metal - silver for the most part, but also gold bars, coins and jewelry. Valuable stuff in those days; a fortune today.

Loaded down with treasure, which made her not only heavier and harder to handle, but much more attractive to pirates, the lumbering galleon re-traced her route through the Horn, back up the coast and into the friendly port of Carderas, Cuba.

By the time the ship reached Cuba, it had been a well over a year since the men aboard had seen their Spanish homeland. While none relished the prospect of leaving hospitable Cuba, all were happy to be headed home.

They would never make it.

The Santa Castillo, taking advantage of a favorable wind, left Carderas, and, carefully skirting the Grand Bahama Bank, entered the Straits of Florida.

She was headed east by northeast into the Atlantic with all the sail she could carry when, with Grand Bahama Island about 150 miles off her starboard side, a lookout scanning the seas from the fore top-gallant masthead spotted on the horizon ahead a tiny white speck that could be just one thing.

#

Some eight months after the Santa Castillo set out from Cadiz, the English privateer Neptune's Grace was berthed in Plymouth harbor being provisioned and made ready for sea. A crew of about 250 men was being assembled, a captain had been chosen though, like his Spanish counterpart, we don't know his name. We do know the name of her First Lieutenant, one Horace Barnaby, and it is thanks to his meticulous diaries and careful notations in the vessel's navigational log that so much is known about the ship.

Neptune's Grace was a rather ordinary frigate, about 88 feet long and 23 feet across the beam. Tiny by today's standards, about average for her day. She carried 40 cannon on her high gun deck, giving her the ability to maneuver sharply with guns run out and fire a broadside in heavy seas. Each of her guns fired a twenty-pound cannon and weighed as much as two modern pickup trucks.

Amongst other things, she carried 20 tons of water, the meat of 200 head of cattle and 500 pigs casked and salted, 10,000 pounds of salt, 40 tons of bread and biscuit, the juice of 50,000 limes, 10 tons of sugar, five tons of tobacco, a ton of coffee and enough rum to give

each man a short shot a day for the duration of the voyage.

Her captain (in his diaries, First Lieutenant Barnaby refers to him always as "the captain" but never mentions his name) carried Letters of Marque from King James I of England. The letters said (once you cut through a lot of flowery language and old-fashioned spelling) that Neptune's Grace could race about the West Indies blasting big holes in other ships and ripping off their cargoes on two conditions, namely that she confine her attacks to enemies of England and that she kick back a healthy chunk of the takings to the King. It was sort of like being a federally-licensed, closely-regulated, government-approved mugger.

Letters of Marque in hand and fully loaded with the sort of delicious fare sailors enjoyed in those days (heavily salted pork and stale biscuit, for the most part), she set off for the West Indies. No one had then figured out how to calculate longitude so, in the manner of the day, Horace Barnaby (who as First Lieutenant was the ship's navigator) beat a southerly course until he reached the correct latitude, then sailed along that line until sighting land.

With no Cape Horn to round and little in the way of really bad weather, the crew of Neptune's Grace enjoyed a rather more pleasant journey than the poor souls aboard the Santa Castillo. Of course, pleasant is all relative. The seventeenth-century English diarist Samuel Pepys once said that life aboard a warship was like being in jail, with the added possibility of drowning and I suspect he knew what he was talking about.

To keep idle hands from getting up to no good and make sure the crew were in top shape for the battles to come, Barnaby and the other officers drilled them around the clock. Privateer crews were never as well-trained as the Royal Navy, but they were nowhere near as sloppy as the Spaniards. By the time Neptune's Grace arrived in the West Indies she could out-sail and out-gun just about any ship she was likely to encounter.

Not that she encountered anything worth pursuing. It's a big ocean and ships are small things. Without modern goodies like GPS and radar and such, ships of that day had no choice but to sail around with lookouts posted high in the rigging scanning the horizon for something juicy.

After weeks of fruitless searching, provisions were running low and spirits were sagging. According to the ship's log, Horace Barnaby set course for what we now call Grenada. But his diary records that they actually hit Antigua, which was just as good so the ship remained there for about a week.

Suitably refreshed and still glowing from what Barnaby called "native hospitality and good cheer," but folks today know as "getting

drunk and boffing the local girls," Neptune's Grace left Antigua and set out once more in search of a fat galleon waddling back to Spain.

Three months of searching brought nothing so (if the ship's log is to be believed) Barnaby set course for St. Lucia, but (according to his diary) ended up in Puerto Rico and stayed there for eight days.

Back at sea, Neptune's Grace beat up and down the islands for 120 solid days without spotting anything more substantial than a few fishing boats and another English privateer having equally bad luck.

Morale was sinking fast. Privateer crews, from the captain on down, were paid a cut of the proceeds. A rich prize could set an officer up in style for the rest of his life and leave even the lowliest seaman feeling flush. An unsuccessful voyage, on the other hand, meant the crew had to sign up on other ships before their meager savings ran out. For the captain, it could mean permanent unemployment if word got out that he was somehow responsible for his ship coming home empty.

Spirits took a nose-dive when, after spending three weeks cruising about the east coast of Spanish-held Cuba, a junior lieutenant recognized a few landmarks from an earlier voyage and revealed that the ship was actually off the Bahamas.

Making the most of a bad thing the captain put into Grand Bahama for re-supply and yet more of Barnaby's "native hospitality and good cheer." They were there for ten days and, except when on watch, none of the men was ever more than an arm's length from a woman or a bottle.

While the men were busy drinking and screwing and the officers were doing much the same thing, though somewhat more discreetly, the captain was meeting with local officials and officers from other ships. By the time Neptune's Grace let go her cables and slipped from port, he'd been assured by half a dozen reliable sources that the waters around the Bahamas and the southern part of Florida were teeming with treasure-laden stragglers from the Spanish fleet.

Two days later, they found one.

#

The Santa Castillo never really had a chance.

Neptune's Grace was smaller, faster, more maneuverable and more heavily armed than the lumbering Spaniard. As well, her officers were more experienced and her crew far better trained. Her captain was even sober. Horace Barnaby notes in his diary that the Spanish skipper appeared drunk when the English raiders eventually boarded his ship.

The English privateer came at the galleon from leeward, cutting

off any chance of her escaping and forcing the Santa Castillo to beat to windward. Once in range, her guns' crews fired salvo after salvo of cold shot into the galleon. They'd had a long ocean crossing to practice and, once they found their range, few missed their target. After a single half-hearted broadside, more to avoid the ignominy of surrendering without having fired a shot, the Spaniard dropped her sails and struck her colors.

Barnaby admits in his diaries that he should have made sure the guns' crews fired at the galleon's masts and superstructure. As it was, carried away by bloodlust, they hammered away at her hull. Shot after shot crashed through the Spaniard's oak planking leaving dozens of gaping holes below the waterline. By the time the English sailors boarded the ship, she was already sinking.

She wasn't sinking all that fast, but she was sinking just the same. Normal practice was for the privateer to send over a skeleton crew to sail their prize to the nearest friendly port. But Barnaby could see that the Santa Castillo wasn't going anywhere.

He brought his ship close to the sinking galleon and set about transferring as much Spanish treasure as he could to his own cargo hold. He sent over his meanest, nastiest warrant officer, a Mr. Theckwith, to encourage the Spanish crew to assist in the transfer, which he did by hauling out his cutlass and slicing open the bowels of the first man to refuse then telling the others that those who cooperated would be set free in the ship's boats once the job was done. Those who didn't, however, would be tied to the mainmast and left to go down with the ship.

The Spaniards jumped to the task enthusiastically as if their lives depended on it, which of course they did, and the job went as smoothly as could be expected considering everything had to be lowered into boats, rowed from one ship to another and hauled aboard.

We don't know how much of the Santa Castillo's cargo made it onto Neptune's Grace before she went down. First Lieutenant Horace Barnaby, in his diaries, professes himself pleased with the work done by "the fearful Dons and my own greedy crew." He talks about retrieving "the better part" and "a handsome share" of the total cargo, but offers no specifics. It must have been a lot, as there are a few later references to the officers and men passing the quiet hours with stories about what they planned to do with their share of the prize.

The Spaniards were let into the ship's boats, given reasonable provisions and some crude navigational equipment and left to fend for themselves. The Santa Castillo died of wounds suffered in battle and sank in deep water.

Modern treasure hunters made three attempts to salvage her

remaining cargo, twice in the mid-60s and once in 1972, but she had apparently broken up on her way to the bottom and scattered her treasure over a vast expanse of ocean floor. Each of the salvage teams found small amounts of silver and a few gold coins, but the total haul was not even enough to cover the cost of the expedition.

There is still plenty of silver and gold down there, but with each passing year it gets harder and harder to find. But Sharkey Drysdale wasn't looking for the Santa Castillo. He was much more interested in something else and, after months of research, had figured out where it was. And now, by following Sharkey's trail, so had I.

I couldn't wait to get back to Boxley Cove and tell Lara.

#

"So is this all true?" Lara asked. We were sitting at her kitchen table. She'd cooked supper. It wasn't a "date" supper, more of a "come on over, tell me all about it and I'll fix us up something to eat" supper, but I was happy to be there just the same.

"As near as I can figure, yes," I said. "Of course, most of it comes from Horace Barnaby's diaries and the ship's navigational log and we don't know how truthful or accurate they are. But I'd say it's basically true."

"So this isn't a confidence scam at all?"

"Oh, there was a con all right," I said. "The Great Panhandle Exploration Company is as phony as Sharkey's other schemes. I'd say Judge Nelson Ardley was probably the mark."

"I don't get this," Lara said. "Where's the con? What's the angle?"

"I don't think there is one," I said. "I think this thing started out as one of Sharkey's rackets and, somewhere in the middle, he actually found something."

"He found the galleon?"

"No," I said. "It broke up. There's nothing to find."

Lara shook her head. "I'm lost."

"Sharkey Drysdale," I said, with as much drama as I could muster, "found Neptune's Grace."

#

Neither Horace Barnaby, nor any of the other officers and men aboard the British privateer ever got to spend their prize money. In fact, only a handful of them ever saw England again.

After watching the Santa Castillo slip below the sea, the captain ordered Barnaby to set a course for Kingston, Jamaica. Kingston was well-known for its bars and brothels and the captain felt a good run

ashore would reward the men for their efforts and leave them refreshed and invigorated for the long voyage back to England.

Barnaby set sail for Jamaica, but found himself off the Cuban coast when a storm, the likes of which no one but the skipper and a few of the older men had ever seen before, blew in from the Florida Straits.

The captain should have headed into the storm and made for the open sea. With the storm blowing west and the ship traveling east, they would have been out of it in mere days. But acting on advice from his First Lieutenant, who later admitted to being more worried about losing a week in Kingston than losing the ship, Neptune's Grace tried to outrun the bad weather.

They were in the thick of it for three weeks. Four men were blown overboard and could neither be seen nor heard, let alone rescued. Much of the rigging was ripped away and the sails were torn and patched and re-torn and re-patched countless times. Sixteen days into the storm, Neptune's Grace lost her rudder. "If God does not soon take pity on this ship," Horace Barnaby wrote in his diary, "we are not long for this Earth and the sea shall claim our souls."

On the last day of the third week, the storm abated. The two days previous had been the worst yet as the storm worked itself up and become a hurricane. But on that quiet morning the men stood on the deck of their tiny, battered ship and gave silent thanks to their maker.

Neither the captain nor Barnaby had ever been in an actual hurricane so it never occurred to them that the calm was deceiving. The hurricane hadn't blown itself out. The ship was sitting in the eye of the storm.

The captain ordered every available square foot of sail to be set. There was no way Neptune's Grace would reach England in her sorry state. He needed a quiet cove to anchor and make repairs.

Later that night, while Barnaby stood watch, the eye passed and the swirling mass of the hurricane took hold of the ship and literally beat the tiny craft to death. Carrying all possible sail, rudderless and laden with stores, supplies and stolen treasure, the frigate was in no condition to fight back.

Three boatloads of men made it off the doomed privateer. Horace Barnaby's last navigational fix had placed the ship "100 miles southwest of the southernmost point" so he set a course due northeast in hopes of striking land.

Only Barnaby and twelve of the men in his boat survived. The other two boats were lost and, in the fourteen days they were adrift, six of Barnaby's men died. By the time they hit land, they were near exhaustion.

Once on dry land, the men gorged themselves on clean water and

fresh fruit and gave themselves a day or two to recover before setting off in search of rescue.

They headed east, for the Atlantic coast. Perhaps the men were more tired than they looked, but it seemed, to Barnaby, to take far longer than it should to reach the coast. More than once he checked his compass, worried that they were moving north in error.

Eventually, after ten days of hard marching and after losing another man to exhaustion, they struck the coast and began to move northwards.

The Royal Navy frigate that eventually saw Barnaby's three emergency fires approached cautiously. Pirates had used ruses to lure unsuspecting ships before and the frigate captain was wary. He cruised up and down the coast for three hours while his officers scanned the coast with their telescopes looking for hidden trouble.

Finally, when all he could see were thirteen shabby looking white men running up and down the beach, waving and hollering, the frigate captain sent a boat to pick them up. The boat's crew landed with pistols primed and cutlasses drawn, expecting the worst, but the men were clearly English and Barnaby had with him, along with his diaries and navigational log, the ship's Letters of Marque.

The men from Neptune's Grace were pressed into naval service and Barnaby was offered a temporary commission at the acting rank of junior Lieutenant. When the frigate finally returned to Plymouth, nearly two years after the rescue, he was released.

Twelve months later, hopelessly awash in debt and suffering from pneumonia, Horace Barnaby hanged himself from an oak tree until dead.

#

"Well it's a great story," Lara said. "But I don't see how it helps. We're right back to the problem of knowing what the 'southernmost point' is."

Lara picked up our empty plates, tossed them in the sink and began setting up her coffee maker. She looked over at me. "Does that smug grin on your face mean you've figured out what the southernmost point is?" she said.

"Well, to be honest, Sharkey figured it out," I said. "I just followed along behind him."

"So where is it?" she said. "Key Largo? Key West? The Tortugas? Or are you planning on spinning the suspense out all night?"

"No," I said. "I'll tell you. The southernmost point is Apalachicola."

"What!"

I could understand Lara's surprise. Apalachicola isn't anywhere

near south Florida. It's right here on the Panhandle, smack in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, about 75 miles due south of the Alabama and Georgia border and only a half-day's drive from Boxley Cove.

"How the hell do you figure that?" Lara said.

I pulled out a cheap world atlas I'd picked up for six bucks at the Museum of Maritime History. "Follow with me for a bit, Lara," I said.

I opened the atlas up to a page I'd marked. It showed all of the West Indies and the lower tip of Florida.

"You remember when they were low on supplies, Neptune's Grace set course for Grenada," I said, pointing to the map. "But Barnaby's diary says they ended up in Antigua."

"Okay."

"What's the difference in distance?"

Lara picked up a pen, marked the space between Antigua and Grenada and measured it against the map scale. "Antigua is about 400 miles north," she said.

"Good," I said. "Now, later they visited Puerto Rico even though Horace Barnaby was aiming for St. Lucia."

"All right," said Lara, already starting to get it.

"That difference is ... ?"

She measured again. "400 miles north."

"Ah ha!" I said. "Now you remember when Barnaby almost missed the Bahamas because he thought it was Cuba?"

"I think I can guess," Lara said, "but I'll measure it anyway."

She did and found the Bahamas to be about 400 miles north of Cuba.

I turned the atlas page by page until I found a large map of the State of Florida. "Care to do the math?" I said.

Lara put her pen against the map scale and marked off 400 miles. She placed her finger on the spot, then laid the pen roughly in the middle of the Florida Keys. "Gainesville," she said, pointed to a landlocked city in the middle of the state.

"Forget longitude," I said. "They didn't know how to measure that, back then."

Lara moved her finger directly across the map to the southernmost point on the Florida Panhandle. "No doubt about it," she said. "Apalachicola."

Somehow, First Lieutenant Horace Barnaby had consistently mis-plotted his position as being 400 miles south of where he actually was. We'll never know why. Maybe his sextant was out of alignment. Maybe the ship's compass was set wrong. Maybe he couldn't do the math. Perhaps he was just a shitty navigator, though that's unlikely given the consistency of his errors. There's no way to know. But, time after time, he was off by 400 miles.

"That's why it took him so long to reach the Atlantic before he was rescued," Lara said. "He wasn't just slipping up the coast. He had to cross half the Panhandle first."

"That's what Sharkey discovered," I said. "Don't ask me how he did it or why nobody did it before him. But whatever the reason, that's what happened. And that's what convinced him to drop his confidence scheme and actually go out and find the treasure."

"He probably thought it would be easy," she said. "And I guess he'd be right."

"No doubt," I said. "You have to account for some inaccuracy in Barnaby's range and bearing. But it's pretty clear where your starting point is."

Unlike the southern tip of Florida, Apalachicola is a clearly defined point. There's Cape San Blas or St. George Island, both of which are close together. There's no long string of Keys to worry about, and nothing like the Tortugas. If you're looking for "the southernmost point," you don't have a lot of choices.

"So what do we do now?" Lara asked, though she knew the answer.

"Two things," I said. "First we figure out where Judge Nelson Ardley fits into all this. He's the only one involved who's still alive. And I'll bet he knows all about Barnaby's navigational problems."

"And after that?" Lara said.

"After that, Officer Travis," I said. "We sail out there and help ourselves to some sunken treasure."

CHAPTER 7

Every budding young newspaper reporter has seen the movie *All The President's Men* at least a dozen times and I'm no different. In the film, as the Watergate racket unfolds, two Washington Post reporters meet with their prime source, a shadowy figure who calls himself Deep Throat. When the two newsmen complain that they're out of leads, Deep Throat tells them to "follow the money."

It's good advice. You can cover up just about any criminal activity, but money leaves a trail that can be obscured, but never completely erased.

In the case of Judge Ardley, the money trail was all I had left. While I'd heartily enjoyed my evening of strippers and slime at The Beaver Lodge with Finbar O'Flaherty, he really hadn't given me much to go on.

Lara Travis couldn't do a lot on her end either. A judge was unlikely to have much of a file on the police computer and any inquiries by an ordinary patrol officer were likely to attract unwanted

attention.

So we decided to take Deep Throat's advice and follow the money.

Bank records can be scammed pretty easily, but first you have to know where your subject does his banking and what his account number is. Which is how I came to be sitting on a bright pink overstuffed couch playing goochie-goo with one of Darlene Kerr's two dozen cats.

"Oooh, he's a good boy," I said, with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

"He likes you," Darlene gushed. "Don't you Mr. Buttons? Don't you like Rex-y Rex?"

Darlene weighs in at about two hundred pounds, lives on the sort of chocolate that only comes in heart-shaped boxes, reads six Harlequin romances a week and, more to the point, works in the circulation department of The Tallahassee News-Ledger, one of my many previous employers.

I figured there was a pretty good chance the judge was a subscriber. If he was, he more than likely paid by an automatic deduction from his bank account. The days of newsboys knocking on your door to collect the week's subscription fees are long gone. These days most people use direct withdrawal. If the judge paid by credit card or didn't get the paper, I'd be out of luck. But there was a really good chance the News-Ledger circulation department would have his bank data and I was prepared to suffer the attentions of Darlene's pampered felines to get it.

"I don't know, Rex," Darlene cooed. That's confidential information. I could lose my job."

Darlene batted her eyelids and took a step closer. I suddenly realized there were limits to how far I'd go to get Ardley's number. I'd play with those rotten cats and jabber on in baby talk, but that's where I'd draw the line. There were easier ways to get what I needed. I'd rather pick through the judge's garbage for a week than play boy-toy for Darlene Kerr.

She took another step towards me. I grabbed the nearest cat, a scrawny thing with a pinched face like Marie Antoinette finding a bad smell. "Now who's this little furry friend, then?" I gasped. "What's your name, little girl?"

"That's Lady Penelope," Darlene said. "Be gentle with her, she's very emotional."

Apparently I wasn't gentle enough and Lady Penelope showed her full range of emotions by scratching my arm and running away. It didn't hurt much, but it gave Darlene a chance to bandage my wound. She must have read one too many of those romance novels where a brave heroine nurses a lusty pirate back to health, because she fussed

and fawned and generally carried on like I'd taken a cutlass blade through the heart and was mere inches from death. I figured I'd play to her fantasy for my own selfish ends. I'm rotten like that, but it works.

"Darlene," I said, gazing deep into her eyes and trying to sound as much like Fabio as possible. "I know it's risky, but I need you to be strong. A good friend of mine (who, by the way, is also single and not seeing anyone at the moment) is in deep trouble. Judge Nelson Ardley may be involved. I must find out as much as I can. Will you help me?"

"Well ..." Darlene wavered.

"He's a good man, my friend," I said. "Tall. Handsome."

"I don't know," she said, softening.

"Did I mention that he loves cats?" I said, pulling out the big guns.

"Okay, Rex," Darlene said, "I'll do it."

#

Becky Sutcliffe didn't need persuading. She hates cats, dislikes chocolate, thinks romance novels are for morons, weighs 90 pounds dripping wet, could bench-press my Land Rover if she put her mind to it, and was eager to help.

She always is. Becky just loves this private eye game. She's always after me to let her work backup on a stakeout or take down a bad guy. Now and again I ask her along and she always performs like a pro.

Becky runs an outfit here in Boxley Cove called OfficeMaxPlus. It's a sort of combination photocopy shop, office supply store, postal drop, telephone message center and secretarial service. She acts as a virtual office for small companies like mine that don't warrant space and a staff of their own.

The mailing address on my Fowler Cruising Inc. business cards is actually the address of OfficeMaxPlus. The phone number rings on Becky's desk and if anyone sends me a fax it comes out on the big Nokia machine at the back of her store.

When I got there early the next morning, the message from Darlene had already arrived. Becky handed me a slip of paper with "Gulf Coast Savings and Loan:

#

A759887-23. When do I get to meet your friend?" written in no-nonsense block caps.

"On a case there, Remington Steele?" Becky said, with clear interest. "Need a part-time Laura Holt?"

I told her pretty much everything but the actual location of the wreck. Becky's no gossip. I've told her things in confidence before and she's one of the few people I've ever met capable of actually keeping a secret.

"So you figure Ardley is mixed up in this treasure racket?" she asked.

"I'm not even sure it is a racket," I said. "I'm just trying to figure out where he fits in."

"Well either way, he's got a motive."

"For what?" I said.

"For killing your friend Sharkey and his pals," Becky said. "If it's a scam and they ripped him off, he could be after revenge."

"A bit drastic for a judge, don't you think?"

"Yes, probably," Becky said. "But if there really is a fortune down there, he might have knocked them off to cut them out of their share."

"That's more of a possibility."

"Mmmm," Becky said. "Gold lust, you know. It does weird things to people."

"On the other hand," I said. "If Ardley isn't the one doing the killings, chances are he's the next victim."

#

It was Becky who actually scammed the bank while I sat in the office and watched in mild amazement. If I ever decide to turn my private investigation work into a legitimate licensed operation, I know where I'm going for an assistant. Becky was both brazen and smooth. I'm sure even Sharkey would have been impressed.

First, she called the main courthouse number in Tallahassee and got the name of Judge Ardley's private secretary, one Betty-Joe Ashton. Then she called Betty-Joe, pretending to have dialed a wrong number.

"I just want to get an idea of how she talks," Becky said.

Armed with a name and a voice, she called the Gulf Coast Savings and Loan. "Howdy, y'all" she said, a bit broadly, I thought. "This here's Betty-Joe at Nelson Ardley's office. Ahhh need you to fax over the judge's bank statements for the past three months just as quick as you can."

Becky wove some ridiculous tale about the judge being audited by the IRS and instructing his secretary to gather together his financial documents for the coming inquisition. Betty-Joe, Becky claimed, had accidentally tossed out the judge's bank records and now, with the

auditors due to arrive in mere minutes, she needed fresh copies.

"He'll toss me on the grill and fry me fer sure if he finds out I lost them papers," she said, with just enough fear in her voice to make you want to reach out and help her.

Becky gave the bank clerk the judge's account number and waited while she brought up his records on the computer and printed them out.

"Do you still have our fax number?" she said. "I'll give it to you again, save a bit of time."

She gave the bank clerk her own fax number and, seconds later, the Nokia came to life and the financial history of Judge Nelson Ardley began piling up in Becky's in-basket.

"Aren't you worried she'll keep your number?" I said, after Becky had rung off.

"No," she said. "That clerk probably jotted it down on a scrap of paper and kept it just long enough to dial. I do the same thing myself. I guarantee you, that phone number is already sitting in the bottom of somebody's wastebasket. Now let's take a look at this stuff and see what that judge of yours has been up to."

It didn't take us long to go through Ardley's bank records. For the most part, it was pretty ordinary stuff. But there were two pages that told a different story.

"Man, that's weird," I muttered under my breath. "Better see what Lara can make of that."

"Lara?" Becky said. "Who's this Lara?"

"Another one of my Laura Holts," I said, gathering up the bundle of fax paper. "I've got them stashed all over town."

#

I paged Lara and arranged to meet her at Grab-O-Java. I got there first, ordered a large French roast and sat down at a booth. I'd taken a full two sips when one of the waitresses left the counter and came over. She was all of eighteen, five-foot nothing, cute in a dull sort of way and a bit nervous. I don't know why. I'm not a bad looking guy, I guess, but it's been an awfully long time since teenage girls hit on me with any regularity.

"How's your coffee?" she asked, head cocked to one side, biting her lower lip.

"Fine," I said. "Hot."

She laughed like I was the funniest guy in the world. "Hot," she said. "I guess you wouldn't like it cold, would you?"

"Sure wouldn't," I said. "Unless I was planning to spill it."

She laughed even more and thrust out a tiny hand. "I'm Tina."

"Rex," I said. "Rex Fowler."

We shook hands. She held on a moment too long and looked back to the counter where her friends were all busy pretending not to look at us.

"I haven't seen you here before," I said.

"I'm new. This is my second day."

"Like it?"

"Oh, yeah," she answered, smiling. "You come here a lot?"

"Now and again."

"By yourself?"

"Sometimes."

"Like today?"

"Not today," I said. "Today I'm waiting for someone."

The smile dropped. "A man someone?" she said. "Or a woman someone?"

"A cop someone," I said, spying a white BCPD cruiser pulling into the lot.

The girl looked over as Lara parked her Robocop and walked in. The sun caught her blond hair and even at a distance, her green eyes sparkled.

"That your cop?"

"That's my cop."

"Is she your girlfriend?" Tina asked.

"Kinda."

Tina didn't look happy. "I'd better go," she said, pointing to the counter where Lara was now ordering her coffee. "She's way outta my league."

"Tina," I said. "Let me tell you a secret. She's way outta my league, too."

#

"I leave you alone for a minute," Lara said, chuckling as she sat down, "and you're off chasing the help."

"It's beyond my control, Lara. I'm just a natural born babe magnet."

"Then I'll forgive you," she said. "But you must promise only to use your powers for good."

"Yes, officer, ma'am" I said, broadly "Always happy to cooperate with the poe-leece."

"So what have you got?" Lara said, pointing to the fax papers on the table.

"Hard to say," I said. "I don't know what to make of it."

Lara started to read.

"Well he goes to a massage parlor," she said, pointing to an entry on the second page.

"Huh?"

"These check entries here," she said. "Electronics Super Warehouse, a hundred dollar check every couple of weeks. It's a rub club. BCPD vice unit busted the place a week ago."

"They were running a brothel in an electronics store?" I said.

"No, no," Lara said. "There's no store. But they pick an innocent-sounding name for their bank accounts. That way, customers can pay by check or credit card without having to explain to their wives and accountants what 'Magic Fingers Massage' is doing on their bank records. This isn't what you wanted to show me, though, is it?"

"No," I said. "It's interesting, but I doubt if it means much. "The good stuff's further on."

Lara continued, then stopped, then re-read a couple of pages.

"He takes out every penny he's got in the world?" she said, quizzically. "Then, a month later, he puts it all back again? Any idea why?"

"I haven't a clue," I said. "I was hoping you'd think of something."

It was confusing. About six weeks previously, Judge Nelson Ardley had cleared out his checking account, cashed in a stack of T-bills and municipal bonds, maxed out two VISA cards, taken a second mortgage out against his house and run his line of credit to its limit. In all, the judge had walked out of the bank with a single bank draft for roughly \$350,000.

About a month later, the \$350,000 was returned to his account by wire transfer. Shortly thereafter, the judge re-paid the loans and credit cards and started buying more bonds. The source of the wire transfer wasn't indicated. It seemed to come from an offshore bank, but there was no way to tell which one or even which country.

"What would a straight-arrow judge do with \$350,000?" Lara mused.

"Lots of things," I said. "Buy a boat, go on a trip, whatever. What we need to figure is what the judge would do with that kind of money for just four weeks."

"Gambling?"

"No," I said. "He'd have to have broken exactly even. Besides, he's not a gambler."

"Maybe Ardley didn't do anything with the money," Lara said. "Maybe he just loaned it to somebody."

"That's more likely," I said. "Question is, who? And does this have anything to do with Sharkey Drysdale's sunken treasure?"

"Only one way to find out," Lara said.

"What's that?"

"Go and ask him."

#

I went to see Ardley by myself while Lara spent the day driving around in a BCPD squad car making sure the wave of violent crime that has swept the country and provided hours of cheap programming for the Fox TV network continued to bypass Boxley Cove.

I started early and arrived in Ardley's sleepy Tallahassee suburb well before ten am. The house looked quiet and there was no sign of the judge's car in the drive. No answer when I rang the front door bell a couple of dozen times either.

I walked around the back, looked for open windows and found none, then tried the back door. It was locked. But the lock was one of those cheap types, built into the doorknob. I'd have it open in seconds. No sign of an alarm system either. I reached into my back pocket for a small screwdriver and ...

"Morning," said a nearby voice. "Help you with anything?"

I spun around and spotted a man next door fishing a thick wad of junk mail out of his letter box.

"Yeah, I hope so," I said, recovering from the surprise and trying to sound innocent. "Got a package here for the judge, but I think he's out." I held up an envelope I'd brought as cover. The only thing in it was a nine-month-old copy of Newsweek, but it did the job.

"Not around," the man said. "Haven't seen Nelson for more than a week now. Figure he took a vacation. About time, I reckon."

I looked sheepishly at my envelope.

The man said, "Just put it in the mailbox."

"I can't do that. He's a judge, you know. This could be confidential legal stuff." I'm a bit old for that gee-whiz, aw-shucks routine, but I was doing my best to sound like an eager beaver.

"Do you have any idea where the judge might be?" I asked. "It would really help me out."

"Try his cottage."

"Cottage?" This was exciting. Nobody had mentioned a cottage. Maybe Ardley really is a crook and that's where he stashes his bribe money. Maybe his "cottage" is a five-million dollar ranch house on a dozen acres of lakefront. I could really be on to something.

"Yeah," said the man who, I'd begun to notice, never spoke in full sentences. "Down on Bald Point. Right on the coast. Can't miss it."

#

I get excited far too easily.

Nelson Ardley's "cottage" turned out to be a run-down fishing shack. It wasn't even "right on the coast." It was right on a pathetic little stream that seemed to be slowly transforming itself into a small swamp. I had to ask directions three times and still nearly missed it.

When I turned on to the long, rutted trail that leads up to Ardley's place and heard a loud noise, I didn't immediately recognize it as a gun shot. I thought my Land Rover was up to her old tricks again. It was the second shot, which winged off my right fender and left a four-inch scar along the truck's aluminum skin, that convinced me to abandon the vehicle and seek cover in the thick growth of trees.

The third shot took out a headlight and was followed by a very scared sounding man's voice.

"Stay right the hell where you are," the voice said. "I've got plenty of ammo."

"Judge Ardley?" I called out, acting on a hunch.

"Maybe."

I knew it was him.

"My name is Fowler. Rex Fowler. I just want to talk to you."

"I don't care who you are," Ardley yelled back. "I don't want to talk to you. Now get in that truck-thing of yours and get the hell out of here."

Another shot shattered my remaining headlight. The old judge was a pretty fair shot. He was picking off my Land Rover like he had no idea how much spare parts cost these days. But he wasn't shooting at me. I'd slid away from the truck and started moving slowly towards the little shack. I didn't think he could see me. Either that or he just hates Land Rovers.

"I'm a friend of Sharkey Drysdale," I yelled.

Two quick shots whistled by my head, one on each side. The judge couldn't see me, but he could hear well enough to fire at the sound of my voice.

I was getting closer. I moved directly behind the fattest tree I could find and crouched low.

"I'm not armed," I said. That was a lie. I'd slipped my Browning inside my back waistband. I wasn't planning to use it, but I didn't want to give it up just yet.

"I know there are people trying to kill you, but I'm not one of them."

No answer.

"I'm Rex Fowler," I said again. "Sharkey Drysdale was killed on my boat. I'm just trying to find out what's going on. Can I talk to you?"

More silence. Instinctively, I fell back on some of my old reporter's lines.

"I just want to hear your side of things," I said, still keeping the tree between me and the judge. "You can tell me as much or as little as you're comfortable with. And if you decide you don't want to talk anymore, I'll leave. Is that fair?"

The judge was quiet for a minute or two, then said, "Step out onto the road with your hands over your head."

I did most of what he asked. Lifting my hands in the air would make me look like a criminal, so I kept them down. But I held them away from my body, with my palms open and forward. Ardley didn't object so I started walking slowly forward.

I was no more than a hundred yards from the fishing shack when three shots broke the silence. It was a different gun this time, smaller caliber but a much faster rate of fire. I hit the ground and rolled hard off the road as Ardley loosed off a couple of rounds above my head.

"Unarmed, eh!" he yelled. "You lying fuck."

I screamed back something about it not being me, but he didn't believe a word of it and I felt a heavy rifle bullet thud into a nearby tree. I hauled my 9-millimeter out of my pants, crouched low and moved forward and to the left.

More shots fired - two or three different guns plus Ardley's. Somebody emptied an entire thirty-round magazine. The flimsy shack was no protection. Unless Ardley had stacked sandbags inside, he wasn't going to last much longer.

I waited for the next barrage, aimed my weapon in its general direction, emptied the clip and hit the deck. Seconds later a wall of brass and lead wailed through the trees like a driving rain. I began to wish for the good old days of two minutes ago when Nelson Ardley was the only person trying to shoot me.

The gunmen went back to strafing the shack while I stayed low and slipped my only spare clip into the Browning. Much more of this gunplay and I'd soon be out of ammo. Those eighteen-round double-stacked Glocks were starting to look really attractive.

The firing died down for a moment and I poked my head up like a nervous groundhog, but saw nothing. I heard the sound of a door being kicked open, then a short burst of handgun fire, then more silence.

Someone clicked a fresh magazine into a weapon and emptied it as fast as he could pull the trigger, but none of the rounds came anywhere close to me. I reckoned they knew someone was out here, but they didn't know where I was and weren't about to spend all day searching. If I kept my head down long enough to let them get away, I'd be okay.

So that's what I did. I huddled on the ground, looked at my watch and waited a full fifteen minutes. I slid quietly towards the drive,

picked up a rock and chucked it high over the lane and into a clump of trees. No one shot at the noise so I did it again. All clear.

The shack, when I got to it, looked like a cheese grater. The door swung open and I stepped inside. Thanks to all the bullet holes, it was bright inside. The judge was wearing a Kevlar body armor vest outside his shirt, but it looked like an old one-plate model and they don't stop much. Not that it would have done him any good. He'd stacked up bricks and two-by-fours along the front of the shack with small cut-outs for his rifle. But he'd done nothing about the sides and his attackers had moved along his left flank and shot him through the thin walls. His body was covered in blood. His face was unrecognizable.

I didn't touch a thing. I walked slowly up the driveway until I reached my Land Rover. My two headlights were gone thanks to Nelson Ardley. And thanks to the men who killed him, my two front tires were, for the third time, completely flat, both valve stems cleanly cut.

I was starting to get really tired of that.

CHAPTER 8

I didn't want to call the cops, but Lara Travis talked me into it. I'd left too much of a trail just to walk away. The cops would trace me through the tow-truck guys, or when they found the spent casings from my Browning. Better to fess-up from the top.

Of course, we didn't tell them the whole truth and I got the distinct feeling the two cops who spent four hours taking my statement didn't for a second believe that I'd driven out there to try and sell the judge a boat cruise and just happened upon a killing.

"You know, Officer Travis," I said, after the state cops had taken my statement and run through the usual "investigation continuing; don't leave town" speech. "You and I are rapidly running out of clues."

"We've only got one solid lead left," Lara said.

"Neptune's Grace."

"Exactly," she said. "So what shape is your diving gear in?"

#

I always keep my diving gear in tip-top condition, but it didn't do us any good. We didn't find the Neptune's Grace that easily.

Lara took a couple of days off work. In any other police force, she'd have had to book vacation time months in advance. In Boxley Cove, she just left a note in the watch commander's in-box. There are so many cops in this town, the brass hats are actually happy to see officers take time off, especially when the squad is on day shift. Very little crime occurs during the daytime, but for the past two years Chief

Cyrus R. Flockett has been running a double day shift. He reckons the citizens of Boxley Cove like to see their police department in action, but as very few of those citizens are out at 3am, some re-scheduling is in order. That's what passes for community policing in this town.

"100 miles southwest of the southernmost point" was a pretty long run for Horace Barnaby and his men, huddled in an open boat. For Lara and I, comfortably nestled aboard NewsHound, it was a pleasant six-hour journey under sail and motor. We brought food and supplies enough to keep us for three or four days.

Thinking back, the big Rex and Lara Treasure Hunt was doomed to fail right from the start. Aside from the diving gear, we we're completely unprepared to go searching the ocean floor for a four-hundred year old wooden ship. What little preparation and planning we did do consisted of cleaning the coffee maker and making sure we brought with us a decent selection of cheese.

So far, aside from a few flat tires, everything about this case had gone pretty well for us. We'd followed Sharkey's trail closely without getting ourselves lost or killed. We still had questions about Ardley, but we'd clear them up soon enough. It just seemed like a logical end to the whole thing for us to zip out, help ourselves to some sunken booty and retire to a life of riches.

Actually finding the "100 miles southwest of the southernmost point" location was easy thanks to my GPS. The GPS (Global Positioning System) is a little hand-held box that hooks up with military satellites orbiting the Earth. They cost about \$500 and work like a charm. You just punch a couple of buttons and your exact latitude and longitude, down to about a fifty foot square, pop up on the screen. So long as you've got fresh batteries, you always know where you are.

Trouble is, Horace Barnaby didn't have a GPS. He doesn't say in his diaries how exactly he came up with his range and bearing from land, but it's safe to say it likely wasn't all that accurate. His "100 miles" could easily be 120 or 130 or maybe 80. And "southwest" is a rough bearing at best. Even a small error of a couple of degrees magnifies terribly at 100 miles.

As treasure hunts go, ours covered a relatively small area. But for two people on a little boat, it was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

The water off the Gulf Coast is blue-green and clear (hack travel writers call it the "Emerald Coast"), but a hundred miles out it's too deep to see bottom, which is just as well as the Neptune's Grace would have been found years ago if you could just look down and see it.

Our entire collection of high-tech search equipment consisted of NewsHound's on-board sonar. It's about five years old, the sort of

thing you pick up at the hardware store for a couple of hundred bucks. It's never worked very well, but it was all we had so we made do.

We started at a point exactly 100 miles southwest of Apalachicola and sailed clockwise in ever-widening circles comparing the depth on my marine charts with the depth on the sonar, hoping for differences. I had the notion that if the chart said the water should be, say, a hundred fathoms and my sonar said it was only ninety eight, the difference could perhaps be explained by the presence of a wooden ship full of gold and silver. I am, as anyone can see, a bit of a dreamer.

If we were looking for the Titanic my plan might have worked. But Neptune's Grace was hardly bigger than a couple of city buses and much of that was probably buried in the sea bottom. If she stuck up more than a dozen feet, I'd be surprised. The natural undulations of the sea bed were greater than that.

So we sailed around and did a lot of diving, which was good fun. I'm no great shakes as a diver. I'd done a little before I bought the boat and later, when I set up Fowler Cruising, I took a couple of advanced Scuba courses figuring my customers would expect me to know what I was doing. As it's turned out, few of my clients are interested in diving and those that are already know what they're doing and don't need my help.

Lara has even less dive time under her belt than me, but she's a natural. She falls right into the steady, rhythmic breathing you need to get the most out of your air tanks. And she swims with a silky economy of effort that not only conserves energy, but makes her a delight to watch.

The search was good, if unproductive, fun for a couple of days, but by day three we'd had enough putzing around underwater and were starting to get frustrated at our lack of progress. As well, one of the steam pipes on the Gaggia machine sprung a leak and we were both dying for a cup of coffee. We got up late, put in a few hours of half-hearted diving, spent a full two hours eating lunch, then headed back to Boxley Cove.

One thing was clear, if Lara and I were ever going to find Neptune's Grace, we were going to need a lot more than a sailboat built for cruising, a crapped-out coffee maker and a sonar made for finding fish.

#

The sun was setting as we made our way towards the pier. There was a warm breeze coming off the headland. I brought NewsHound in slow and easy as the warm, clear water lapped about the bow.

"Got any big plans for the evening?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Lara said, grinning. "Housework. Laundry. Big stuff."

"Stay aboard for supper?" I asked.

"What about my laundry?"

"I'll lend you a shirt."

"A clean one?"

"The cleanest one I've got."

"That's not saying much, Fowler," Lara said. "But you've got yourself a date."

Lara set to work cleaning and re-packing our Scuba gear while I tidied up the cabin and prepared a meal. I did a good job of it, too, if I say so myself.

It was all cold. Cooking is a bit of a chore on NewsHound and you really have to plan for it. But it was good stuff. I dished out thick wads of sliced roast beef with real Dijon mustard and some spicy chutney. I carved two plump barbecued chickens. There was enough potato salad left in the fridge and plenty of fixings for a decent green salad, as well. I can't stand a salad that's all lettuce and tomato. Mine was a meal in itself.

I slipped a Van Morrison CD in the player and turned it up just enough, lit a couple of candles and set out the food on the flip-out surface that does for a dining table in NewsHound's cramped cabin. For Lara, I selected a nice white wine and a decent enough red. I settled for a tall orange juice with lots of ice.

Lara had gone forward towards her bunk, studiously not looking in the cabin so as not to spoil my surprise. When I called through that dinner was ready, a completely different woman appeared. She looked like Lara Travis, but the woman I saw was wearing a sharply tailored black dress that started with a couple of spaghetti straps, worked its way downward, clinging to every curve of her body and ending about mid-thigh. With a subtle hint of makeup and a pair of jet-black, three-inch, patent-leather fuck-me-pumps, it was enough to stop traffic.

I gulped. "Wow!" I said, being such a smoothie. "Where did all that come from?"

"You don't like it?" Lara said, with a smile. "I can change back into my foul weather gear, if you prefer."

"No, no," I said, horrified at the thought. "I just wondered where it came from."

"I brought it with me."

"Do you always travel with those clothes?"

"A girl's got to be prepared," Lara said. "You never know when you'll want to impress some guy."

"Well you've impressed me," I said, guiding Lara towards the dining table. "In fact, if you play your cards right, you may just get a free meal out of this."

#

Part way through supper, Lara caught me looking thoughtfully at the dinner table.

"Something on your mind?" she said.

I made some excuse. A few minutes later she moved one of the wine bottles. My eyes followed.

"Are you getting the urge to drink again?" Lara asked. She sounded concerned, but confused as well.

Lara knows all about my drunken past. But in all the time she's known me, I've not once expressed any interest in going back to the days of lost weekends, temporary blackouts and Tums for breakfast. And I've never been one of those recovering albies who can't walk by a liquor store without drooling. Lara and I have had dinner plenty of times and when she feels like wine or a beer, she orders one. Like all my friends, she's never had to worry about drinking in my company.

"No, not at all," I said. "That's all over and done with."

"But there is something, isn't there?"

"It's hard to explain," I said. "It's been about four years I've been off the booze. And compared to most, I've had an easy go of it."

"I think you can take some of the credit for that," Lara said.

"Maybe so," I said. "But the fact is, I've never wavered, never been tempted. Honestly, I hardly ever think about it."

"But now you're tempted?"

"No, really I'm not," I said. "But I'm just wondering if I have to abstain completely. I'm just wondering if I could be the kind of guy who can sit down to a pleasant dinner and enjoy a glass of wine or am I always going to be one sip away from the drinking life."

"How badly do you want that glass of wine?"

"Not a lot," I said. "Even when I drank, I was never much of a wine lover. But I want to know how much of a hold this booze thing has on me. Can you understand that? I don't really want the wine, I just want to be a normal person about this."

"I understand," Lara said. "You're an independent guy. You take pride in being able to handle things yourself, in never needing anybody's help. So the idea that there's something in your life that you can't control bugs the hell out of you."

"Maybe," I said. "So now what?"

"Better try it," Lara said, "or you'll always wonder."

I picked up a glass from the counter and poured myself a glass of red wine.

"Bad sign," I said.

"How so?"

"I chose the red," I said. "Higher alcohol content."

"It was closer," Lara said. "And I've been drinking white. You're not a drunk. You're just polite."

I took a modest sip, placed the glass down, then picked it up and had another. I cut and ate a piece of cold roast beef and a forkful of potato salad, but didn't taste either. I had another mouthful of wine, set the glass down and stared at it for a full two minutes.

"How do you feel?" Lara asked.

"Fine. Fine," I said, with a casualness I didn't feel "But I'd really like to finish off that bottle and chase it down with a fifth of rum."

Lara gently placed her hand over mine. She looked a bit sad.

"Would you excuse me for a minute," I said, rather formally.

I picked up my wine glass, carried it up on deck and poured the contents over the side. I kneeled down and rinsed it clean.

When I got down below, the chemical toilet was filling up after being flushed. The table was exactly how I left it, but Lara's wine glass had been replaced with orange juice and the two wine bottles were missing. I spied the neck of one of them peering out from under the garbage can lid.

"This is a wonderful dinner, Rex," Lara said, trying desperately to be as nonchalant as possible. "I could get used to eating like this."

I sat down. Lara cut a slab of beef and slid it onto my plate. There was plenty of beef already there. It was a gesture.

"You didn't have to," I said. "I didn't mean ..."

"Ahhh, I wasn't that thirsty anyway," Lara said, taking great care to sound relaxed and off-hand. "It'd be silly to fill up with booze when you've prepared such a delicious meal."

I looked directly at Lara Travis, reached over with my right hand and gently stroked her right cheek with the back of my two extended fingers.

"Babe," I said. "I ... uh ... well ... you know ..."

"Shut up, Fowler," Lara said, grinning. "Quit yer yakkin' and kiss me."

#

There's a lot to be said for making love to someone you know well. There's no awkwardness, just an easy familiarity tinged with a feeling of illicit excitement. Of course, there's also a lot to be said for sleeping with every lusty wench who walks past your front door, but I'll leave that thought alone for now.

Lara in lovemaking is much like Lara in everything else - direct, enthusiastic and eager. She slid over to my side of the table, draped

herself theatrically over my lap and we kissed deeply.

There's only so much two adults can do around the dinner table of a small boat and we soon reached the limits of our flexibility. I found myself feeling new levels of respect for all those people who managed to have sex in the back of a Volkswagen. I had a full-sized Plymouth once and I never managed it.

"As I recall," Lara said, probably thinking the same thing. "there are four perfectly comfortable bunks on this boat."

I scooped Lara up in my arms and carried her forward.

"I was just thinking," she said, as I set her gently down on the nearest bunk.

"Thinking what?"

"I'm going to have to start wearing this black dress a lot more often."

#

It was sometime after one in the morning when I heard the sound of somebody trying to sneak aboard my boat without making any noise. As I had not invited anybody, there was every chance they were up to no good.

Lara was asleep and didn't hear anything. I wouldn't have heard anything either, but I'd been awake for some time. Lara was lying close beside me with her head tucked in my arm. I'd been gazing at her for a good half hour. My thoughts were racing all over the map. I knew it was a big deal for Lara and I to end up in bed together, but I also knew it likely wasn't the start of anything permanent either. We've done this before and always remained good friends, but nothing more, afterwards.

I thought about that business with the wine, too. I had no burning wish for another glass of booze, which was a good thing. On the other hand, it looked like I was going to have to stay clear of liquor for a lot longer than four years. The more I thought about it, the less of a hardship it was going to be.

And I thought some more about Lara and how her back arched madly when she reached climax and how her blond bangs stuck to the little beads of sweat that formed above her eyes and how she spread her fingers wide and flat against the bed when she got aroused and how it was a good thing for me she doesn't have long fingernails.

I also spent a few minutes wondering if she'd consider wearing her police uniform next time we had sex, but I'm weird like that.

#

I sat still in bed for a while, listening closely and concentrating hard to hear more. The noise grew closer until I heard the sound of someone shuffling about the bridge. It sounded as if they were rifling through my navigational charts.

The big question now was whether or not to wake Lara. The tough-guy move would be to slip out and handle things myself, leaving the little woman to sleep. But Lara Travis is a cop and a good one. If you're going to take on one or more possibly armed invaders, it's best to throw macho to the wind and get yourself some backup.

But I didn't know how to wake her without startling my uninvited guest. In the movies, James Bond puts his hand over the sleeping babe's mouth, taps the side of her head with his Walther PPK and, presto, she's up. Somehow, having spent many an afternoon kickboxing with Lara at the BCPD gym, I didn't think that would be a great idea. She'd probably flip me in a choke hold or knock me out with a Vulcan pinch, or some other nastiness.

The sounds had moved down to the main cabin where my visitor seemed to be searching the cupboards. He'd grown more confident now and was making more noise. The next step would be for him to move forward to the sleeping cabin. I started thinking about a weapon. My Browning Hi-Power would have been an excellent choice, but it was sitting in my truck. I've got to start carrying that thing around with me.

I slid my arm out from under Lara's head and lowered her gently to the pillow. By now, I was pretty sure there was only one guy on NewsHound. With surprise on my side, I could probably take him down, even if he had a gun. I couldn't figure out how to wake Lara quietly and couldn't risk losing the element of surprise.

I slipped silently out of the bunk and dropped, barefoot onto the deck. Immediately it hit me - I was completely, buck-naked. There was a pile of clothing dropped haphazardly about the floor, but it was too dark to figure out what was mine and what was Lara's and I wasn't about to waste time scrabbling about for a pair of pants.

I slid forward to the curtain that divided the sleeping area from the main cabin. The cabin light switch is on a bulkhead. I yanked the curtain aside, hit the light switch and yelled "Freeze!" as loudly as I could.

In a second, I took in the scene. All the cupboards were open and most had been searched. There was a pile of maps and notebooks carefully assembled near the exit. That, presumably, was he had come for.

The intruder looked like a cat burglar from a really lame TV show. He wore black from top to tail - black sneakers, black cargo pants, a black turtleneck and, covering his face, a black ski mask. If you

wanted to arouse the attention of every boat owner and passing cop in the neighborhood, you couldn't come up with a more suspicious-looking outfit. Clearly an amateur. A pro would have worn top-siders and yachting gear and just walked in like he owned the joint.

He nearly jumped clean out of his clothes when I burst in, but he recovered quickly. He took one look at the maps and papers, made to grab them, but thought the better of it and dashed up on deck. Naked as a baby, I ran after him.

He was fast for a pudgy little guy, but NewsHound was berthed three boats out and the black-clad runner was no boatman. The mess of lines and cleats and such that litter every sailboat's deck slowed him down. Twice he tripped, fell and picked himself up. By the time he hit the pier, I was right behind him.

He was a surprisingly good sprinter, but had no endurance. I can run all day if I have to. There's a short set of stairs where the pier meets the shore and that's where I got him. I dived at his spinning legs, wrapped my arms around them and brought him down with the sort of running tackle that makes sports fans reach for a fresh beer.

"Stay down!" I yelled, forcing my knee hard against his back and wrenching his flabby right arm around in a wide arc. "Stay the fuck down! Do it now!"

"Yeah, yeah, okay," said a familiar voice. "I'm not moving."

Lara reached the pier soon after. She'd thrown on some hastily-grabbed clothes and I was surprised to see how attractive she looked in my pants and shirt. Roughly, I picked the black-clad figure up off the pier, grasped his right arm in a locking hold and yanked off the ski mask.

"Pretty nice work for a naked man," Lara said. "Any idea who he is?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Lara Travis, say hello to Sharkey Drysdale."

#

"First thing, you're going to tell me what the fuck you're doing on my boat in the middle of the night," I said, after we'd dragged Sharkey back aboard NewsHound and tossed him in a chair. "Then you're going to tell me why the hell you're not dead."

Sharkey tried to pull himself together. He wasn't a physical guy. I doubt if he's ever been in a real fight. And in all the time he's known me, he's never seen me that angry.

"That's a fair question, Rex," he said, clearly stalling. "And I'm going to explain everything. We'll clear this up, no problem."

"Cut the crap, Drysdale," I snapped. "And answer the question."

Sharkey looked over at Lara for support, but she just glared back

at him. "Okay," he said. "People are getting killed around here. I was trying to make sure you guys were all right."

"By searching my cupboards and ransacking my chart table? What were you looking for, midget assassins?"

Sharkey thought for a second, sat up straight, opened his arms wide like he had nothing to hide, and looked directly into my eyes. "I really shouldn't be telling you this," he said, in his familiar soothing tones, "but I've been working very closely with the federal government. It's all very hush-hush, so I hope I can rely on you to be discreet."

I stood up, took Sharkey gently by the arm and turned to Lara. "Would you excuse us for a moment," I said, turning back to Sharkey. "Sharkey, step up on deck with me. There's something I want to show you."

Sharkey went up ahead of me. As he stepped on deck, I pointed forward and he moved towards the bow. He turned around and said, "What's the big"

I put most of my 180 pounds into the punch and drove it hard into Sharkey Drysdale's stomach. He went down like a rock in a pond, gasping and wheezing. I let him cough and splutter for a while then hauled him up by his greasy black hair and rammed his back hard up against the main-mast.

"Now you listen to me, you lying piece of shit," I growled, my snarling teeth no more than two inches from his face. "I've been shot at. I've watched two men get killed. And I'm getting really tired of people letting the air out of my truck tires. I am in no mood to sit around and listen to you bullshit me. So you tell me exactly what the hell is going on here, or I'll toss you over the side and drown you like a ship's rat. Do you completely understand?"

Sharkey groaned. I took it to mean "yes."

"Are you absolutely sure?" I asked, making as if to punch him once more. "Or do I need to hit you again?"

"Yes! I mean, no! I ...," Sharkey said, trying not to speak and vomit at the same time. "Just don't hit me. Jeez."

I was still steaming mad as we made to go below deck. Sharkey had recovered most of his wind and as we left the upper deck he turned to me and said quietly, "You know what, Rex? For a guy who just spent all night in the sack with Lara Travis, you're not exactly mellow."

I didn't know whether to laugh or hit him again.

CHAPTER 9

"I faked the whole thing," Sharkey Drysdale said, wiping beads of

sweat from what would be his upper lip if he had any lips to speak of. "Those Australians, they were just three guys I hired."

"You dived overboard when I was down here making coffee?" I said.

"Yeah."

"Scuba gear in the duffel bag?"

"That's right," he said. "Then all that stuff at the mall. I knew you'd chase them, so we set up a way for them to give you the slip."

"You owe me for the two flat tires," I said. "Plus all the damage the cops did to my boat."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," Sharkey said.

"Why such an elaborate killing?" I asked. "And why me? Don't you have any enemies?"

"If I just disappeared, they'd figure I took off," Sharkey said. "I had to make it look good. And you were the perfect witness."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "Compliments like that, I don't need."

"Hey, you've got a solid rep in this town," Sharkey said. "If I could get you investigating, knocking on doors and asking questions, the word would get out. Sooner or later they'd hear about it and figure I was dead."

"Sharkey," Lara Travis said. She'd let me handle things so far, but now she was interested. "Who are 'they'?"

"The Gannachettis."

"Vittorio Gannachetti?" Lara and I said together. "The mobster?"

"Well he's the boss," Sharkey said. "But it's his brother Frankie who's doing the killing. He's paranoid about people running to the cops. He doesn't trust anybody outside the family and he likes to tie up loose ends."

"By killing them."

"Yeah," Sharkey said. "To Frankie, 'tidy' and 'dead' mean the same thing."

"If Vittorio is the boss," Lara asked, "why doesn't he tell his brother to stop?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "From what I hear, Frankie pretty much does what he wants and tells his brother later or not at all. Vittorio may not even know what's going on."

"So in the meantime," Lara said, "the carnage continues."

"You got it."

"Keshman? Hortega? Dellavista?" I said. "Frankie got them all?"

"Festus Dubois?" Lara added.

"Yeah," Sharkey said, his beady little eyes showing a touch of genuine sadness. "I've known those guys for years."

"And now Ardley," I said.

"They got the judge?" Sharkey said, surprised. "I didn't think

they'd kill him. But that Frankie Gannachetti, he's a nutcase."

"Sharkey," Lara said. "Why are they doing this? Just start at the beginning and tell us the whole thing."

So he did.

He reminded us how Vittorio Gannachetti had been indicted by the feds on a racketeering beef and ended up in a Tallahassee courtroom in front of Judge Nelson Ardley. The defense team had argued for weeks for a change of venue to Miami, but every argument they presented was refused.

"It must have really messed up their plans when they lost the change of venue," Lara said.

"Not really," Sharkey said. "They knew they wouldn't get it. The motion never had a hope. It was just a delaying tactic."

"For what?"

"Well that's where I came in," Sharkey said.

Vittorio Gannachetti knew Nelson Ardley was a straight arrow who wouldn't take a bribe. He could throw any amount of cash at the judge, but it wouldn't do any good. The judge had a comfortable little life and he wasn't terribly interested in becoming a rich man. But Gannachetti reckoned that if Ardley lost that comfortable life, he might just change his mind. If he found himself flat broke near the end of his career with no hope of recovery, he might just decide to take one quick and easy payoff."

"So the Gannachettis hired you to bankrupt the judge?" I asked.

"Hired is a real nice way to put it," Sharkey said. "I came home one night and found Frankie Gannachetti and three musclemen with no necks sitting in my living room fondling their pistols like a bunch of pimply teenagers at a circle-jerk. After that, I did whatever they wanted."

The Gannachettis had hired just about every crooked private detective in Florida to dig up dirt on the judge and Frankie turned over the files to Sharkey. There wasn't much. Ardley didn't smoke, hardly drank more than a glass of wine with dinner, never touched dope and, as far as they could tell, the closest he'd been to a hooker was a three-year tour on a night court bench (the PIs obviously didn't find out about the Magic Fingers Massage Parlor). But the judge's obsession with old sailing ships and sunken treasure was what caught Sharkey's eye.

"He's nuts about that stuff," Sharkey said. "He spends all his spare time building these ship models and staring at old maritime charts."

"Sharkey," Lara said. "Jefferson Dellavista told us that you spent a lot of money on this con."

"Spent a wad," Sharkey said. "All Gannachetti money. They didn't

care. They weren't trying to turn a profit. They just wanted to clean the judge out and they'd spend whatever it took to do it."

"So that's why you did all that research?"

"If I'd spent any more time at that damn museum they'd have charged me rent," Sharkey said. "Here's the thing. In most con games, the mark is a bit of a crook, too. A big part of the scam is that he thinks he's breaking the law along with you. You say you need money to bribe an official or rig a horse race or something. But Nelson Ardley is such a goody-two-shoes, you can't do that. The only way we could get him to throw in his money was to convince him that I'd actually found the precise location of a treasure-laden wreck."

"But Sharkey," Lara and I said together. "You did. You found the Neptune's Grace."

Sharkey went white with shock. He sat there unmoving for a good five minutes, his eyes flicking back and forth from Lara to me. For a moment, I thought he was going to simply stop breathing.

Finally he spoke, "Just how much do you two know?"

#

We told Sharkey how I'd broken into his house and recovered most of his notes and charts. We said we'd followed the trail to the Museum of Maritime History and told him how I'd read the same papers as he did and reached the same conclusion.

"So you figured out that Horace Barnaby was always four hundred miles north of where he thought he was," Sharkey said.

"I did," I said. "But here's what I can't figure. You and I both spotted Barnaby's error right away. It wasn't hard at all. So what makes you think we're the first? What's to say somebody else didn't figure it out years ago, find the ship and clean it out? There could be nothing down there but a load of rotting wood."

"Lucky break for us," Sharkey said. "Barnaby's diaries have been in the museum's collection for decades. But until last year, the ship's navigational logs were in a private collection - some old guy in Nebraska."

"So?"

"Well last year, the old guy dies, leaving his entire collection of documents to the museum."

"So you just happened to be the next guy along?" I asked.

"You got it," Sharkey said. "About time I caught a break, too."

"That's all fine and dandy, Sharkey," Lara said. "But what got you searching for the wreck in the first place?"

"I didn't set out to find sunken treasure," he said. "I only went that route because I knew Ardley would find it irresistible. But like I

said, it had to look perfectly believable. And I was dealing with a guy who was almost an expert on this stuff. So I read everything and talked to anyone I could find who knew about sunken wrecks."

"Nobody suspected anything?" I asked.

"No," Sharkey said, with some pride. "I said I was writing a novel and wanted to make it really accurate. People bent over backwards to help me out."

"Smart move."

"Thanks," Sharkey said. "Anyway, I started reading all that stuff in Horace Barnaby's diaries and in the ship's log about the voyage of Neptune's Grace. Every time they went anywhere, Barnaby got it wrong. I remember saying to myself 'Boy, this guy's a shitty navigator.' I was making jokes to myself about his navigating skills. Anytime he'd refer to himself as 'navigator,' I'd call him the navi-guesser. When I came to that '100-miles southwest' bit, I shook my head and said, out loud 'says you.' Then it hit me."

"If he didn't know where he was for the entire voyage, why would he know where he was when his ship was sinking?" I said.

"Exactly," Sharkey said. "So I went back over every single navigational fuck-up. And I found each of them wrong by roughly the same amount."

"Nice work," I said.

"Yeah, you shoulda seen Nelson Ardley's face when I showed him what I'd dug up," Sharkey said. "Nearly burst a gut."

"I'd like to know more about Ardley," Lara said. "How did he get his money back?"

"He didn't get it back," Sharkey said. "He lost his money so he took a bribe from the Gannachettis."

"It wasn't the same money," I added. "I think we got a bit confused when we looked at Ardley's bank records. We saw three-hundred-and-fifty grand go out of his account and three-hundred-and-fifty grand go back in and we assumed it was the same three-fifty."

"How'd you get a hold of bank records?" Sharkey asked.

"I've got a source," I said. I wasn't about to tell Sharkey how we'd done that. He's got enough slimy tricks up his sleeve as it is.

"So that's probably why Nelson Ardley announced his plan to quit the bench right after he let Vittorio Gannachetti walk," Lara said. "Must have been the only way for a basically honest man to live with himself."

"That's what I figured," Sharkey answered. "I thought it was all over. But then Frankie started killing everybody who knew about the scheme to get his brother acquitted. As soon as Raul's place burned down and Festus disappeared, I knew what was going on."

"So you rigged up that fake murder on my boat?" I said.

"You don't know how hard it was to set that up," Sharkey said. "I had to organize everything and keep one step ahead of Frankie at the same time."

We asked Sharkey if he'd actually found Neptune's Grace and he told us no. He said he'd had no chance to get the right gear together and search for the downed ship. He had enough cash stashed away in different hiding places to pay for a search effort, but, so far, he'd been too busy trying to keep himself alive to be swimming around the Gulf looking for Spanish gold.

"All this still leaves my question unanswered," I said. "What were you doing breaking onto my boat?"

"I wanted my stuff back," Sharkey said.

"Why?" Lara asked. "You already know where the ship is?"

"Yeah, but it was my stuff," Sharkey said evasively, his tiny pink tongue dancing about his mouth like a nervous snake.

"That's not it," I said. "You didn't need all those notes and charts. You just wanted to make sure we didn't have them."

"I've been back to my house, so I knew someone had taken nearly all my books and notes," Sharkey said. "But I didn't know who. I'd heard all over town that you'd been investigating, so it could be you. But it could also have Ardley or the Gannachettis."

"So why pick us?"

"Somebody had to be first," he answered. "And your boat is easier to get into than Ardley's house."

"Or Gannachetti's place," Lara added.

"I was pretty sure it wasn't them," Sharkey said. "And even if, for some reason, they took my stuff, they'd never figure out what we did. As far as they're concerned, this whole sunken treasure business is just a scam."

"You thought we'd slip in ahead of you and clean out Neptune's Grace?" I said.

"I figured you were up to something," he said. "You've been gone for a while."

"We went out to the general area," Lara said. "Stayed three days. But we didn't find anything."

"You went in NewsHound?" Sharkey asked, surprised. "Where did you store the gear?"

"Gear?" Lara and I said.

"Oh, I see," Sharkey said. "You just sailed on out, jumped in the water and swam around hoping to get lucky?"

"That's about it," I said.

"Well if I'd known that, I'd have left you alone," Sharkey said. "There's more to it than that. It's not rocket science, but there's certain equipment you need and you've got to know how to use it."

"We would have figured that out, eventually," Lara said. "This was just our first time out. We would have tried again."

"Well you can forget about that now," Sharkey said.

"Hang on a minute," I said, getting a little pissed off at having Sharkey Drysdale tell me what I could and couldn't do. "It's a free ocean. We're still going after that ship. You may have found it, but you don't own it."

"Listen, Rex," Sharkey said. "That old ship is all I've got. All I know in the world is how to run a con. And I can't do that with the mob on my back. I need enough cash to disappear. I've got to hide so deep, there's no way the Gannachettis will be able to dig me up. I'll cut you in, but you've got to let me have this."

"There's no point fighting about it," Lara said, sensible as ever. "Let's team up. Sharkey, you've got some idea how to find that ship and bring up her cargo. And you've got the money to rent the gear."

"I've got everything I need," he said, defensively.

"Except two people you trust," Lara said. "If you start wandering around the Gulf Coast, Frankie is going to find you. Rex and I can cover your back and help with the recovery."

Sharkey and I thought for a minute. I don't know what was going through his mind, but I liked the idea.

"You can't do it alone," Lara said. "Let us help you."

"Okay, deal," Sharkey said, visibly relaxing as he spoke. "I appreciate this, I really do. With Frankie and his boys chasing me around, I was starting to feel like I didn't have a friend in the world."

"We're just trying to stop you from getting killed," I said.

"Sure," Sharkey said. "But I'm going cut you in. Count on that, you two. There's going to be plenty to go round and I'm the kind of guy who remembers who his friends are."

"Let's wait until we find the stuff, first," I said. "But I'll tell you right now. Whatever happens, you're going to pay for every last one of my flat tires."

#

"So how much is down there?" Lara asked.

Sharkey didn't know. He was certain there was no way Neptune's Grace had taken all 47 tons of gold and silver off the Santa Castillo. Even if they'd had the time to do so, the small privateer wasn't capable of hauling that much cargo without dumping most of her stores or her cannons.

"They wouldn't do that?" I asked.

"No way," Sharkey said. "They were hoping to make for England. Without stores, especially fresh water, they'd never make it. And if

they ditched their cannons, they'd be a sitting duck for any passing pirate or privateer."

Sharkey suggested that the amount of booty taken by Neptune's Grace was determined mostly by how much time the crew had to unload the galleon before she sank. If she was sinking fast, they might not have got much.

"So we could dive down there and find an empty ship," I said. "Or just a small amount of silver."

"Don't worry about that," Sharkey said. "Even if they only got a fraction of the Spanish cargo, it'll be worth a fortune. They would have taken gold first, before silver. Gold is worth three hundred bucks an ounce. Even if they only moved half a ton, just one one-hundredth of what was there, it'd be worth five million bucks. And I'm pretty sure they got more than that."

"What equipment do we need to find that ship?" Lara asked.

"Not a lot of gear," Sharkey said. "But there are a few things we can't do without. We'll need diving gear. You've got that but we'll need extra tanks and a heavy-duty compressor. We've got to get a side-scan sonar, and a magnetometer would be nice. Then a lot of small stuff, heavy-duty lights, recovery bags, markers. We might need explosives, depends on how she's sitting."

"Explosives?"

"Not if we're lucky," Sharkey said. "If we're lucky, she's broken up just enough to make it easy for us to go in and clean her out."

"What if we're unlucky?"

"The worst thing would be if she's broken up completely and scattered her cargo all over the sea bed," Sharkey said. "In that case, we just pack up and go home."

"That's what happened to the Santa Castillo, isn't it," Lara said.

"Yes, but that was because she'd been shot to bits before she sank," Sharkey said. "I doubt if Neptune's Grace broke up that much."

"Wouldn't the storm have broken her up?" I said.

"No. The storm took out most of the rigging and wrecked the rudder, but it wouldn't break up the hull," Sharkey said. "But we could still be unlucky if she turned turtle before hitting bottom."

If Neptune's Grace was sitting upside down on the sea bed, we wouldn't be able to enter by any of her hatchways. We'd have to go through the hull, the strongest part of the ship. To make matters worse, after nearly four hundred years underwater, it would certainly be covered with barnacles and sea growth. We'd have to blast our way in with explosives.

There was no way to tell how long the search would take. We might get lucky on day one. We may never find it. If and when we did find it, the recovery time would depend on how hard it was to get into

the ship and how much treasure was there to be brought up.

"How much is this going to cost?" Lara asked. "And do you have the money to pay for it?" From her tone of voice it was clear that if Sharkey couldn't fund the hunt, there was no way Lara would pitch in. As for me, I had about fifty dollars on me and a little more in the bank. I'm not a real saver.

"I've got the cash," Sharkey said. "Search gear is pricey, but we can rent what we need. I figure about fifty grand for the whole thing, but I can go to a hundred large if we have to."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"At the bank," Sharkey said.

"The bank?"

"Sure," Sharkey said. "Where did you think it would be?"

"I don't know," I said. "I thought you'd have some kind of a stash. A hollowed out tree or something."

"Rex, you've been watching too many movies," Sharkey said, shaking his head and looking at me like I was only marginally smarter than motor oil. "I'm a con-man, you know. I'm not an idiot."

#

Lara and I only got a few hours sleep that night, and what we did get was in separate bunks, thanks to our unexpected guest. I don't know how well Sharkey slept, but I hope it wasn't his most comfortable night. It was a chilly evening and, being a little bummed at his interruption of my evening with Lara, I conveniently "forgot" where I'd stowed the extra blankets. If the little guy woke up with cramps and chills it would serve him right for busting in on my best date of the year.

Lara, back on day shift, was up and out well before seven. Sharkey and I woke about an hour later. I set about making coffee while the little fraudster rustled up bacon and eggs. I generally don't eat breakfast on the grounds that it's dangerous to eat on an empty stomach, but I made an exception and felt better for it.

"So what's with you and Travis?" Sharkey said. "You two an item?"

"Well, I'm trying to be," I said, as sarcastically as I could. "But these dead grifters keep popping up and ruining my chances."

"Are you bopping her yet?" he asked.

"I'll fucking bop you, if you talk like that."

"Oooh, sensitive," Sharkey said. "Must be serious."

"Not really."

"I think it is," Sharkey said. "When a guy starts getting pissed off when his pals accuse him of getting laid, it's serious."

"Leave it alone," I said. "I didn't ask you to butt in, you know. I

didn't even invite you over."

"And I really don't want to be here," he said, setting down two plates of breakfast. "I never asked to get involved in all this."

"So why get me involved?"

"Because I don't have a choice, Rex. I'm fighting for my life here. Of all the people Frankie Gannachetti strong-armed into keeping his brother out of jail, I'm the only one who's still alive."

Sharkey took a pack of Camels out of his back pocket, placed them on the table and sat down. Nobody smokes on my boat and I was damned if he'd be the first. Just let him try and light up.

The coffee was ready. I poured two cups and set them on the table along with milk, cream, and brown sugar. Sharkey added a drop of cream to his, but left the sugar alone.

"It sure looks to me like anybody within a fifty mile radius of you eventually gets killed," I said.

"Frankie's the villain here, Rex," Sharkey said. "He's way over the top, even for a mob thug. He figures the only way to keep a secret is just to kill everybody. But every time he kills one person, it means two more know about it and they have to get killed and it just gets way out of hand. It never stops."

"Can't he figure this out?"

"He doesn't want to," Sharkey said. "One thing you've got to remember, any mob guy will kill you if he has to. It's business, part of being a made guy. But Frankie Gannachetti, he actually enjoys it. To him, this whole situation with his brother is the perfect excuse to go on a killing spree. He's not about to stop just because it doesn't make any fucking sense."

Sharkey took a sip of his coffee, smiled, took another and set the cup down.

"That's a Kenyan roast, isn't it?" he said. "With maybe a dash of Dark Antigua?"

I nodded, reached over to a galley cupboard, fished out an old pack of matches and a saucer that would do for an ashtray and placed them both on the table next to Sharkey's Camels.

Even if he did ruin my date, it's hard to stay angry with a guy who appreciates a fine cup of coffee as much as I do.

CHAPTER 10

Sharkey Drysdale kept his money in hundred dollar bills in safe deposit boxes at four different banks. There was no point in withdrawing all his money. We'd only have to find someplace else to keep it. On the other hand, I wanted to keep Sharkey as near to invisible as I could and I didn't want to have to send him into the bank

every time we needed cash for a new piece of equipment.

We decided to visit each bank in turn and add my name to the list of people allowed access to Sharkey's lock-boxes. He made some wisecrack about me sneaking off with all his money which I ignored and we set off.

It was routine stuff, more time consuming than anything as at each bank we stood in line-up after line-up waiting to add my name, address and signature to a little card with Sharkey's box number on it. There were plenty of smiling bankers in cheap suits willing to help us right away if we'd been looking for a mortgage or a car loan. But as we weren't, we had to line up with the depositors and other riff-raff.

It was nearly three in the afternoon when we finished the last of our business. We stepped away from the teller's counter at the Gulf Coast Savings and Loan (Judge Nelson Ardley's bank, coincidentally) and walked towards the exit. Two beefy guys wearing suits too dark and too heavy for our sort of weather stepped out from behind the table where you fill out your deposit and withdrawal slips and blocked our path.

"You stay in the bank," said the beefier of the two, pointing to me. "And you, little man, come with us."

"You can't just take him," I said, smiling like an idiot. "I paid good money for this guy."

"Shut the fuck up," said less-beefy, clearly not impressed with my quick wit and subtle sense of humor. "Or we'll take you, too."

I glanced around the bank, but nobody seemed interested in us. People stand around banks chatting all the time. The goons were too smart to flash guns, but I knew they'd be packing.

"Okay, walk," more-beefy said, all business.

We just stood there. Sharkey was taking his lead from me and I wasn't moving. I glanced around again, quickly. No guard. I had an idea forming in my head and a minimum wage slob with a six-gun would only mess it up.

"You heard him," less-beefy said, with a sneer. "Move it."

I threw my arms up in the air and shrieked like a Victorian duchess. "He's got a gun!" I yelled. "He's got a gun!"

Thank the stars for Sharkey Drysdale who needed less than a split-second to pick up on what I was doing and follow my lead. Working all those scams must have taught him to play along when your partner starts to improvise. He threw his hands up as well.

"It's a robbery! They've got guns!" he yelled. "Everybody down on the floor! It's a stick-up!"

Within seconds, about a third of the people in the bank had their hands up. Others were frozen with fear. A few had already hit the deck and were making themselves look small. Sharkey and I yelled some

more, but a group of well-dressed female office workers drowned us out with their shrieking.

Sharkey and I hit the deck and slithered as far away from the two thugs as we could get. As I'd hoped, someone behind the counter had hit the alarm. Bells were ringing and I could hear the sound of a siren coming from outside.

If they'd been smart, the two thugs would have just walked out the front door. Of course, if they'd been smart they wouldn't have tried to snatch Sharkey in the middle of a bank. Instead, they panicked. Less-beefy drew his gun, a mean looking .45 caliber Heckler & Koch Mark 23, and more-beefy followed suit.

"Everybody shut the fuck up!" less-beefy shouted.

"Nobody is going to get hurt," more-beefy yelled, grabbing a teller. "Show us the back door and we're out of here."

The teller broke down in tears. There was no back door, she said. Less-beefy walked up, shoved his handgun in the teller's mouth and screamed, but there was still no back door.

By now, the bank was a madhouse. The gunmen were yelling. Most of the customers were either crying or screaming. In the corner near the window, under a huge poster of a young family buying a new car, a middle-aged woman sat with her knees curled up tight against her chest. She was rocking back and forth and whimpering like a child. Her whimpering grew louder and louder until less-beefy walked over and kicked her hard across the face with the inside of his right foot. Her nose started to bleed, but she got the message and stopped crying.

The sirens grew louder and I could see the flashing of squad-car lights. The next few minutes would decide everything. If we were lucky, the gunmen would cut their losses and give up. Failing that, I'd be happy if they tried to fight their way out. They wouldn't last more than half a minute against the BCPD tactical team.

My biggest fear was that they'd try and take hostages. So far, a bunch of civilians had been frightened and a few people had been knocked about. But, as yet, no one had been killed. If the situation fell apart and this thing went to a stand-off, there would be bodies for sure. I started this and if anyone were to die I'd be just as guilty as whoever pulled the trigger.

I caught a quick look through the bank's front window. The street outside was filled with cops. I saw about a dozen squad-cars and, off to the right almost out of view, two black vans with smoked windows. That was the tac team. I heard the whup-whup of chopper blades and looked up. Air One was on scene.

More-beefy saw the same thing. He leveled his gun (a 9mm Glock, smaller than his partner's pocket cannon, but nasty all the

same), then thought the better of it. Half the Boxley Cove Police Department was out there. He'd need a tank to fight his way out.

More-beefy looked around for a likely hostage. He shifted his pistol to his left hand, swung his right hand back and downward towards a pretty young girl who, just minutes before, had been applying for her first credit card.

I'm no sprinter, but I was up and out of the blocks faster than Ben Johnson on steroids. I had a good twenty feet to cross and I don't recall my feet touching the ground once. I hit more-beefy broadside and we careened over a startled old guy in a gray cardigan and hit a clear patch of floor.

Less-beefy saw what was happening, aimed his .45, but couldn't get off a clear shot. More-beefy was bigger and stronger than me, but he had no endurance. All my running paid off and I was still going strong when beefy started to fade. He'd kept his gun, but that gave me two fighting arms to his one. As long as I could keep more-beefy from aiming at me and keep the fight sufficiently fluid to stop his sidekick from spreading my brains all over the mortgage department, I'd be all right.

I felt, more than heard, a massive pop sound. It was like when you're a kid and someone bursts a paper bag in your ear, but a hundred times louder. The tactical team had lobbed a concussion grenade at the bank and it took out the entire front window in one quick blast.

Less-beefy felt it too. He whirled around, dropped into a firing stance and aimed outwards. Big mistake. Two quick pops from a BCPD sniper's rifle and less-beefy's head simply disappeared. His body stood there like a broken store mannequin, then crumpled to the ground.

More-beefy and I were still struggling when the cops rolled in. Unsure of who to grab, they took out both of us. I felt a gloved fist smash into my kidneys and some sort of a leather cosh connect with my right temple. I went down without a fight.

#

Sharkey was surprisingly cool, all things considered. Driving from the bank to my bungalow, I expected him to start blabbering on about how he really was in danger and how I should be taking his troubles more seriously, but he didn't. He probably figured I knew that already and he was right.

The cops had kept us in the bank for a full three hours, taking statements. The meat wagon hauled off what was left of less-beefy and two detectives from the major crime squad took his partner into custody.

I'd looked around for Lara Travis amongst the assembled cops. She wasn't there and there was no sign of any more Gannachetti goons, so we hopped in my Land Rover and drove off.

The plan was to stash Sharkey at my place. He'd fill me in on the undersea recovery gear we'd need and the next day I'd run around to the various supply outlets and collect it. Sharkey was still wearing his ridiculous all-black cat burglar outfit. I lent him a pair of jeans and an old Florida State sweatshirt but, as I'm a good foot taller and about fifty pounds heavier, he looked even more foolish and I promised to pick him up some more appropriate clothes.

Sharkey cooked up bacon, eggs, sausage and fried tomatoes while I cleared six months worth of junk off the couch and dug around for extra blankets. We ate supper, played a few half-hearted games of chess, watched a really silly TV show about a Navy lawyer, and hit the sack early.

"Rex," Sharkey said, getting ready for bed. "We're going to find that ship. I know it."

"I hope so, Sharkey."

"It's going to change my life," Sharkey said. "It's my big shot."

"Get you clear of Frankie Gannachetti, anyway," I said.

"Yeah, that's the main thing," Sharkey said. "But even if there was no Frankie, I'd still want out. It's no life, you know, grifting."

"Really," I said, genuinely surprised. "I always thought it would be sort of fun."

"It's fun in the movies," Sharkey said, sadly. "It looks like a blast."

"Real life isn't so great?"

"Not great at all," he said. "It's like this. In every game, there's always the point where the mark knows he's lost his money. At first, he runs around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to get his cash back. But sooner or later, he realizes it's gone for good. Once in a while you get a guy who just cuts his losses and walks away, but most of the time it ends up ugly."

"Ugly, how?" I asked.

"You have no idea how many times I've had the shit beaten out of me," Sharkey said. "I don't even remember. I'm not even forty, and my kidneys are just about fucked. And every couple of weeks, for no reason at all, I end up in the bathroom coughing up blood. I spend a hundred bucks a month on pain killers and still I wake up in agony two nights out of five."

"We'll get you out of it," I said. "If that ship is down there, we'll find her."

"What about you, Rex?" Sharkey said. "You'll do okay out of this. What are you going to do with your share?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't really thought about it."

"Oh, come on," Sharkey said. "A big score could change your life."

"You know, Sharkey," I said. "I don't think I want to change my life. I'll admit, a few extra dollars here and there would come in handy. NewsHound needs new lines. The mainsail is getting old. And I'd really like to replace that damned Gaggia machine. But, basically, I kind of like the world I'm in."

"You're a happy guy?"

"I guess I am," I said. "I don't walk around all day whistling in the air and kissing babies, but I'm content enough. I like living in this part of the country. I like what I do for work. And I like my friends. Maybe I should have big dreams, but I don't. For me, this is it."

"So if you're so happy with everything," Sharkey said, "you could probably let me have your share."

"Go to sleep, Sharkey," I said.

And he did.

#

I hate shopping. Even when I'm spending someone else's money and buying or renting thousands of dollars worth of nifty high-tech diving gear, I still hate shopping.

Sharkey knew what we needed and where to get it. I was just an errand boy, running back and forth between my bungalow and the various dive shops and rental outlets. I was worried about attracting attention, concerned that my gathering all this equipment would alert others to the fact that we'd found something, but Sharkey assured me that no one would care. Florida is filled with losers and dreamers who spend every dime they have searching the ocean for treasure that either can't be found, has already been found and recovered, or was never there in the first place. I just hoped we weren't about to join that long line of hopeless wannabes.

I stopped by the pier where I dock NewsHound and arranged with Farley Morris to rent a power boat. He had an ungainly looking Chris Craft 320 Express that hadn't left the dock in months and was pleased as punch when I agreed to rent it. It was an ugly thing, big and chunky with a Volvo diesel engine (the slowest of four available power plants) but it was perfect for the job. She'd move all manner of gear back and forth to the dive site. And if we found what we were looking for, the Chris Craft would happily haul it back.

Having arranged for a boat, I set about picking up the equipment that Sharkey said we needed. I made a few trips. The Land Rover doesn't carry much and her suspension is only moderately softer than a farm tractor, so I lined the bed with old blankets and drove very carefully.

Sharkey was waiting like a kid on Christmas morning each time I arrived. He practically drooled over the Barringer Magnetometer, a metal detector that floats underwater astern of the boat and transmits data back to an on-board console.

"This is the top of the line," he said. "It's really sensitive, point one gamma."

"How that going to help us find a wooden ship?" I asked.

"The ship is wood," Sharkey said. "But the cargo is gold and silver. And the cannons are iron, as are the cannon balls. There's a lot of metal down there and this baby is going to find it for us."

Sharkey was even more excited when I arrived with something called a side-scan sonar. It looked like an ordinary personal computer with a very high-end monitor and some sort of a yellow thing on a cable. I had no idea what it was, but Sharkey was head-over-heels in love.

It was mid-afternoon when I drove up carrying a load of dive tanks, a heavy-duty compressor and a big stack of inflatable recovery bags. I honked the horn a few times, but Sharkey didn't come out.

I got closer to the house and still no Sharkey. He was probably inside side-scanning my bathtub or looking for metal particles in my laundry basket. There were any number of reasons why Sharkey wouldn't be there waiting for me. I shouldn't have been worried, but I was.

And my front door, swinging gently back and forth with the breeze, didn't do anything to put my mind at ease.

#

I jumped on the brakes and brought the Land Rover to a squealing halt. The parking brake hasn't worked since 1978 so I shoved her in gear, turned off the engine and let out the clutch.

My Browning Hi-Power was still stuck below the dash. I yanked it out of its holster, pulled back on the barrel casing bringing a fresh round up and into the chamber and walked towards my house. The front door had swung shut so I kicked it open, led with my weapon and came in low and hard. If anyone was waiting for me, he'd be lucky to get out unscathed.

I needn't have bothered. The house was empty.

The place was a mess. There was junk tossed haphazardly everywhere. But no one had trashed the place. It's always like that. To put it mildly, my housekeeping skills leave something to be desired.

Still, despite the mess, I could see that someone had carefully searched the place. Cupboards were open when they should have been closed and closed when they should have been open. The bathroom

door was ajar and the shower curtain pulled back. And the rack of clothes hanging in my bedroom closet had been pushed aside, as if someone had been looking behind them.

Nothing appeared to be missing and the underwater search gear seemed undisturbed. Sharkey, however, was nowhere to be found. I searched the house slowly and methodically from top to bottom, but Sharkey Drysdale and whoever took him away were no longer in the house.

There wasn't a lot I could do, so I walked back out to my Land Rover. To my shock and amazement, both front tires were fully inflated. I fired up the truck and headed towards town. There's something about knowing that someone has been through your house that makes you want to get away from the scene. The Land Rover bounced and jarred over the rough road.

"Jesus, Rex, do you have to drive so fast," said a familiar voice from under the stack of canvas recovery bags. "I'm more shook up than Elvis."

Out of sheer reflex, I swung my gun around to the rear of the Land Rover where Sharkey Drysdale was busy climbing out from under the bags.

"One of these days," I said, "if I'm really lucky, you're going to stay dead."

"It's a good thing I'm not a deeply sensitive guy," Sharkey said, with a grin, "or I'd take offense at that comment."

Sharkey was trying to be cool with the wisecracks, but I wasn't fooled. His teeth were chattering like it was the dead of winter and his hands shook like a dried-out drunk. He'd been in the bungalow, playing with the dive gear, when Frankie Gannachetti and three of his men had pulled up in the driveway.

"Right away, I knew it wasn't you," Sharkey said. "This Land Rover makes a sound like nothing else on the road. At first, I thought it was Lara."

Suspicious by nature, Sharkey had peered out a crack in my living room curtains and caught sight of Frankie giving last-minute instructions to his men. As the four thugs moved towards the house, Sharkey slipped out the back door and into the thick woods surrounding my place. He'd watched as Frankie's crew searched my house, their curses getting louder and louder as they realized that Sharkey had given them the slip. He waited in the bush for well over an hour, scared witless that Frankie would return.

"I was pretty sure I heard your truck drive up," he said. "But I was thinking Frankie might have got it into his head to follow you. So I waited in the bush while you went in the house, then I sneaked in the back of your Land Rover."

I told Sharkey to keep his head down while I drove in a circular pattern looking for a tail. When I'd satisfied myself that no one was following us, I slowed down long enough for Sharkey to climb over the seat back into the passenger compartment. I took one last look in the rear view mirror before heading in the direction of Becky Sutcliffe's OfficeMaxPlus.

Becky was more than happy to keep Sharkey under wraps. Like I said before, Becky loves all this private eye stuff. The idea of sheltering a fugitive con-man from the hired guns of the Gannachetti family appealed to her belief that, in another life, she was a famous action-hero.

Becky promised to feed, clothe, and generally take care of the little man. In return, I promised, when this was all over, to have Becky aboard NewsHound for a romantic sunset cruise. It was a good deal. I could think of worse things than spending an evening on the water with Becky, though I had no idea how to reconcile that with my maybe-yes, maybe-no relationship with Lara. I figured I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. For now, all I cared about was keeping Sharkey out of Frankie Gannachetti's gun-sights.

Sharkey didn't look all that relaxed when I left him. He'd stopped shaking, but his eyes were darting back and forth like a shell-shocked GI. The slightest noise made him jump and he wasn't pleased to see me drive off.

"You're going?" Sharkey said.

"I have to," I said. "There's still gear to be picked up."

"Don't you think I'd be safer riding with you?"

"No," I said. "I want you to lay low. Becky is going to take you back to her place. Nobody is going to think of looking for you there."

"That's what you said about your house," Sharkey said. "And the bank, too."

"Becky's place is safer," I said. "She's not even a part of this. Why would Frankie go there?"

"Why would he go to your place?" Sharkey said, panicking. "Why would he go to the bank? Something is going on here, Rex. I don't know what's happening, but Frankie Gannachetti seems to know exactly what we're up to."

I muttered something reassuring to Sharkey as I left, but I wasn't convinced. He may have been scared and that could have made him a bit paranoid, but the little guy had a point.

Somehow, Frankie Gannachetti was keeping himself one step ahead of us. I had an idea of how he was doing it, but I wasn't sure. It was time to find out.

With Sharkey safely stashed away, I drove over to pick up Lara. She'd been a bit skeptical the other night when I'd told her I planned to keep Sharkey at my house. I'd assured her there was nothing to worry about. Now I'd have to admit I was wrong.

Lara had been home for a couple of hours. She'd changed into a pair of loose khaki cargo pants and a heavy cotton military style shirt, but she hadn't had time to eat. Since both of us were hungry and one of us was looking really pretty, I suggested dinner out. Lara seemed distracted, but she came along anyway.

"I've stashed Sharkey a few miles up the coast," I said.

"Mmm?" Lara said, staring out the restaurant window.

She hadn't touched her lobster and her coffee had gone stone cold.

"Sharkey," I said. "I've got him holed up at Becky Sutcliffe's place."

"Fine."

"We'll pick him up on the way out to the dive site tomorrow," I said.

We'd arranged to make our first survey of the area. Lara had booked a few more days off work. We planned to run out "100 miles southwest of the southernmost point" and see if our nifty new gear would help us find the Neptune's Grace.

"Sure, okay," Lara said.

"So you'll meet me about eight?" I said. "Down at the pier?"

"Sure, okay," she said, non-committedly. "I'll be there. Don't worry."

I slept poorly that night. After two hours of tossing and turning like a madman, I gave up, wrapped my bathrobe about myself and padded down to the kitchen for a sticky bun and a cup of hot chocolate.

TV was offering the usual late-night roundup of ancient movies, Letterman copycats and psychic hotline infomercials. I surfed (if you can call hopping around three channels "surfing") for a few hours until I'd had my fill of spaghetti westerns, televangelists and amazing abdominal exercisers.

My mind was racing like the Energizer bunny on speed. Too many things were happening all at once. The mob was in town, apparently bent on killing anyone whose last name didn't end with a vowel. Sharkey was back from the dead, but destined for an early grave unless I could keep him out of the firing line. And there was an old ship which may or may not be lying off the Gulf Coast and may or may not be loaded with treasure, some of which may or may not end up as mine.

I crawled back into bed and lay staring up at the ceiling. I played over every possible angle, but couldn't figure a way to make it all fit. Finally, a little after six a.m., I fell into a deep and blissful sleep.

Twelve minutes later my alarm clock went off.

#

Lara was at the pier when I got there. Her little beer-can car was parked near Farley's gas bar and she got out when I arrived. If the puffiness around her eyes was any guide, she'd had no more sleep than I.

"Ready to go?" I said, trying to sound tentatively cheerful.

"Let's do it," she said, with a smile.

We climbed aboard the Chris Craft, stowed our gear, cast off the lines, hauled in the fenders and set out to pick up our teammate.

"We'll swing by Becky's place," I said. "Sharkey should be waiting."

"Great," Lara said. "Super. Terrific."

The old dock near Becky Sutcliffe's house wasn't the most rugged thing when it was first built and it certainly hasn't aged well since. It really wasn't meant for much more than the odd dingy or rowboat, but it would hold the Chris Craft long enough for me to pick up a passenger. I left Lara in the boat, just in case the dock chose that day to collapse.

I returned minutes later, accompanied by a small figure dressed from head to toe in black and wearing a dark ball cap and big sunglasses. We hopped aboard, slipped the lines and were away from the pier in under a minute.

When we were well clear of shore, our new passenger pulled off the ball cap and glasses and I formally introduced Lara Travis to my old and dear friend Becky Sutcliffe.

Lara went white as a sheet. Becky just stood still, unsure what to do.

"Slight change of plans," I said, forcing myself to sound casual. "I hope you don't mind."

#

We were less than an hour off the coast when I heard the high-pitched whine and spotted the bright yellow Cigarette boat closing fast on my port quarter. I forced the throttle forward as far as it would go, but it was a futile gesture. The sharp-nosed Cigarette boat could outrun a clumsy Chris Craft without breaking a sweat. They were on us in ten minutes.

There were three of them in the boat. They looked like extras from a Martin Scorsese movie, the sort of guys who get two lines before being shot dead in the first gunfight. Two stood on the left side, clutching Mac-10 semi-autos. The one at the wheel had a bulge under his shiny suit jacket that probably wasn't a whiskey flask.

I looked at the boat, then at Lara.

"Frankie Gannachetti?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

Lara nodded. Becky was down below.

Frankie's driver eased the speedboat alongside our Chris Craft. I killed the throttle right away and watched as the Cigarette boat sped past. I could hear Frankie yelling as the driver came about and made another approach. He wasn't much of a boatman and it took a lot of backing and forwarding before he managed to line the two boats up alongside each other. The second of Frankie's goons threw over two lines and I tied both boats together.

Frankie and the boys stayed on their boat.

"All right, you," Frankie yelled, pointing his gun towards the lower cabin. "Get the fuck up here."

Becky Sutcliffe hopped up on deck and gave Frankie a wide smile.

"Who the hell are you?" he said, clearly surprised.

Becky told him.

"What the fuck are you doing on this boat?" he said, to Becky.

And then, "What the fuck's she doing on this boat," to me.

"Rex invited me," Becky said.

"I invited her," I said.

Frankie hopped onto the Chris Craft a lot more gracefully than you'd expect from a big guy with no neck. His two goons followed, though with notably less elegance. Frankie ignored the two of us and thrust his semi-auto hard against Lara's cheek.

"Get up," he said, and she did.

"Where is he?" Frankie said, matter-of-factly. "Where is Sharkey Drysdale?"

"Maybe he smelled you coming," Lara said, with more spunk than I'd have shown that close to a Mac-10. "That's pretty powerful cologne you're wearing."

I thought Frankie was going to kill her then and there, but he was remarkably controlled.

"Real funny, Travis," he said. "Real fucking funny. You been out in LA too long. Turned you into a wiseass."

Lara said nothing. She sat down, put her head in her hands and just sat there. Frankie ignored her and nodded to his two men.

"Search the God-damned boat," he said. "Rip it to pieces if you

have to. If that little shit is on this boat, I want him found."

While Frankie stood guard over us, Frankie's men combed the ship from bow to stern. They opened everything and looked everywhere. I heard the tiny pantry cupboards open and close, though we'd have to have chopped Sharkey into five or six pieces to have hidden him in there.

"Not here, Frankie," they said, when they'd finished. "Not on this boat."

"All right," Frankie said. "Get the box."

One of the men hopped back aboard the Cigarette boat and came back with a steel box, about the size of a loaf of bread. It had a pressure clasp on the front and looked like an army ammo box, except that it was painted white instead of dark green. Frankie put it on one of the seats, popped it open and took out two grenades.

"We'll see if the little bastard is up to his old tricks," he said.

Frankie pulled the pin out of one, tossed it over the side and did the same with another. Seven seconds later, we heard two thick, muffled, thud-like explosions. It sounded like a nuclear explosion when you watch it on TV with the sound turned down.

Frankie looked over the water and, seeing no floating limbs or mangled Scuba gear, repeated the process with the two remaining grenades. The result was the same, though I think I spotted a couple of dead fish near the back quarter.

He took another look over the water then nodded to one of his men who pulled from his pocket one of those plastic electric cable harnesses that cops carry in case they run out of handcuffs. He forced Lara's hands behind her back, clamped her wrists tightly and manhandled her onto the speedboat. I took a step forward and got a Mac-10 in the stomach for my troubles so I stepped back.

Frankie's men untied the lines, hopped in their boat and fired up the engine. As the two boats drifted apart, Frankie raised his semi-auto and pointed it at the stern of the Chris Craft, where the twin stainless-steel props sat.

"Gimme a break, Frankie," I said. "What am I going to do? Chase you?"

Frankie thought for a second and, to my surprise, lowered his weapon and muttered something to the thug at the wheel. The Cigarette boat roared to life and took off like a cruise missile late for work. By the time I got the Chris Craft underway, Frankie, his men, and Lara Travis were long out of sight.

#

"Rex," Becky Sutcliffe said, as I set a course and eased forward

the throttle. "I think we're going the wrong way."

"Huh? What?"

"We're headed south," she said, tapping the compass with her forefinger. "Next stop is Havana."

I brought the boat around 180 degrees until she was lined up on a course for home.

"Sorry, Becky," I said. "I'm a bit distracted."

"Wasn't this what you were expecting," she said. "Isn't that why you asked me to come?"

"Yeah," I said. "But it doesn't make things any easier."

"You've got to have a talk with that girl."

"I've got to get her back first," I said. "I didn't think Gannachetti would take her. That wasn't in the plan."

"Will you be able to find her?" Becky asked.

"More than likely," I said. "I'm good at finding people. The hard part is going to be getting her out from wherever she's being held. The Gannachettis have plenty of muscle-bound guys with big guns. It would be a tough thing to raise enough firepower to take them."

"Well you can sign me up," Becky said. "And I bet you'll find Lara has plenty of friends who'll help her out. Then there's all the people in this town who owe you a favor."

"No," I said. "I don't want a war. Even if we could take those guys, too many people would get killed."

"So what do you do?"

"I don't know, yet," I said. "But sheer force isn't the answer. I'm not going to try and out-gun them. I've got to find a way to out-smart them instead."

"Well if you need me," Becky said. "Whatever it is, just call."

"Thanks," I said. "I may just do that."

We reached the old pier near Becky's house. She invited me in, but I passed. I needed to get away by myself and clear my head. Maybe a good long run would do it. What I needed was a miracle. I needed Frankie Gannachetti to collapse of a heart attack or for his brother to retire and move the whole family to Mexico or the south of France.

I sped away from Becky's pier and raced, as fast as the chunky little Chris Craft would take me, towards home. I swung into my berth too fast and too deep. The boat hit the pier like a rock, but no damage was done. It was a pretty rotten piece of seamanship for a guy who skippers a boat for a living, but I figured I had a good excuse.

I tied the power boat up, killed the engine and shut off the gas line. I hopped out and walked along the pier until I reached the stairs where, perched on the bottom rung, shaking like a leaf, with her arms wrapped tight about her chest, Lara Travis was sitting.

CHAPTER 11

Lara Travis looked a mess. A huge purple bruise covered her right eye and a trickle of blood had dried hard over a split lip. My first impulse was to hug and comfort her, but I sat down beside her instead.

We sat there for a long time, neither of us saying a word. Finally, she spoke.

"You knew?" she said.

"It took a while," I said. "And it took even longer for my mind to accept it. But there were just too many times when the Gannachetti guys knew where to find Sharkey. They're not that good. Somebody had to be tipping them off and it wasn't Sharkey and it sure wasn't me. That only left you."

"So that's why you brought your friend Becky out in the boat?"

"I had to make sure," I said. "If it had been anyone else, I'd have just accused them on the spot. But since it was you, I couldn't take a chance on being wrong."

"I guess we're finished now," Lara said.

"I don't know, Lara," I said. "But there's more going on here than just me and you. These guys have been trying to kill a man and you've been helping them. You're a cop. You know what that means."

"Accessory to attempted murder," Lara said.

"Not a normal part-time activity for you," I said.

"I didn't have a choice," Lara said. "I had to do it. They threatened to kill Bobby unless I agreed to lead them to Sharkey."

"And did they?"

"Not so far," Lara said. "But they're serious. They know where Bobby lives, who his friends are, where he works. They have pictures and videotapes. Frankie's men must have been tailing my brother twenty-four hours a day."

"But so far they haven't touched him?"

"No," Lara said. "After that business in the bank, I tried to get out. I told them I wasn't going to tell them anything. That night Frankie came to my house. He had Polaroid pictures of him and his men inside Bobby's apartment. They'd broken in and taken photographs, just to show that they could do it. Bobby was out at a ball game. Frankie took out his cell phone, called somebody and put it to my ear. They had a guy so close to Bobby, I could hear him cheering."

"So you told him where Sharkey was?" I said.

"I did."

"You never went to the cops with this?" I said. "Flockett's a crook,

but he'd give you backup and he'd put a watch on Bobby."

"No," Lara said. "No police."

I sat staring off over the water and thought about what Lara had told me.

"There's more, isn't there?" I said. "The Gannachettis, they've got something on you, haven't they?"

Lara didn't say anything. I could see her she was thinking hard so I left her to it. After a moment, she straightened up, as if a weight had come off her shoulders. She turned and faced me, eye to eye.

"They've more than just got something, Rex," Lara said. "The truth is, they own me."

#

Organized crime got its hooks deep into Lara Travis about a year after she joined the LAPD. They got to her through her brother Bobby.

Lara's mother died when she was just a schoolgirl. Her father ran a lawn care company, one of those outfits that come over to your house and weed the garden, put down sod, add a coating of fertilizer and spray the grass so you don't get bugs. In Arkansas, with the harsh sun and dry wind, people need help keeping their lawn nice and enough of them were willing to farm out the job to a contractor to keep Lara's father in business.

Almost from the day he was born, the Travises knew that Bobby was going to need plenty of special care and education if he was ever going to have a decent life of his own. When he was young, Lara and her dad spent hours every day talking to him, playing games and teaching him the same things over and over again. They'd been told that slow kids like Bobby could learn an awful lot, they just took longer to grasp things. If they were patient and willing to put in the time and effort, it would change Bobby's life forever.

By the time Bobby hit his early teens, Lara and her father weren't up to the task. They were still willing, but more advanced learning called for specially trained teachers and therapists, and they all cost money. Fortunately, the Travis lawn care business was (to use a really bad metaphor) growing like a weed. There was enough money coming in for Lara's dad to keep a decent roof over their heads and make sure Bobby had the teachers he needed.

It was money very well spent. Bobby made excellent progress. It was clear he'd never be a rocket scientist, but there was every chance he'd grow up to be the sort of guy who could hold down a job, maintain a household of his own and, perhaps, meet a girl and settle down. For a kid born with the world stacked against him, it was just this side of a minor miracle.

Lara meanwhile, had signed on with the LAPD and had just come out of the academy. She was three weeks on the job, working Van Nuys patrol, popular with the squad and already showing signs of becoming a first-rate cop.

"Then Dad got cancer," Lara said, in the matter-of-fact tone she'd used throughout the story. "He'd smoked all his life. I used to bug him about it, but I never pushed him to quit. It seemed like a small pleasure for a guy who worked as hard as he did."

As Lara's father's illness grew progressively worse, the lawn care business died along with him. It's not a complicated line of work, but with all your staff made up of students, casuals and part-timers, you have to keep a close eye on everything. With the boss laid up in hospital, occasionally at first, but soon nearly every day, the business quickly fell apart.

Lara didn't know how sick her father was until he was nearly dead. As his income and health declined in lock-step with each other, Lara's dad went through every penny he had saved, sold whatever he could and extended his credit far past the breaking point to make sure Bobby had the teachers, therapists and specialists he needed.

It wasn't until the hospital called to talk about arranging long-term care in a terminal unit and creditors started calling about her dad's bills, that Lara found out just how bad things had become.

"So I did what I could," Lara said. "I found a rest home with twenty-four hour nursing for Dad, and I moved Bobby to LA with me and found him a special school and a therapist."

There was no way Lara could pay for all that on a rookie cop's salary, but she tried. She stopped paying her student loan, maxed-out her credit cards and sold her car. For a time, she was the only cop on the force who rode the bus to work.

It wasn't nearly enough. Before long, she was two months behind on her rent, living in an apartment with no phone and an empty pantry and reduced to cadging rides home from other officers to save the cost of the bus ride.

That's when the mob came calling.

"What made you think of going to the mob?" I asked.

"I didn't go to them," Lara said. "They found me."

"How?"

"When you're a cop," Lara said, "you don't have to go looking for people to corrupt you. They're always there. These people have plenty of time and they watch and they wait. You don't see them. You don't hear them. You don't even know they're there. But one moment of weakness, one time when your defenses are down and right away, they're on your back."

It wasn't the Gannachettis who approached Lara. The

Gannachettis don't operate in California, but they're associated with a couple of families who do. The group that offered to "help a good officer out of a difficult situation" knew exactly how much Lara made, how much she owed and how much she needed each month to support her dying father and retarded brother. And that's what they offered her.

"If it was just me, I would have busted them for bribery right then," Lara said. "But because of Dad and Bobby, I took the money."

She cried all that night and called in sick the next day. More times than she could remember, she resolved to give the money back. But every time she picked up the phone, she saw her dad's face lying in bed wasting away or her brother smiling after a lesson with his teacher.

The mob didn't ask for much in return. Every two weeks, a car would drive up beside Lara's black-and-white, usually while she was parked filling out a report or grabbing a quick cup of coffee. The driver would hand her an envelope, stay a few minutes then leave. There were five guys making the drop and they seemed to take it in turns.

Every three or four drops, the man with the envelope would ask Lara to perform a small "favor." It was never anything big and he was always terribly polite about it.

"Once they asked me to run a license plate," she said. "Another time they wanted a copy of the precinct duty roster. It was all Mickey Mouse stuff."

"What did they want with that crap?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "They were just establishing a pattern of corruption, building a case just like a detective. They didn't want what I was giving them. They wanted me."

#

Lara's father died about the time the mob guys started demanding bigger and bigger "favors," so she decided it was time to get out.

"Even while his business was failing, Dad kept up his life insurance premiums," Lara said. "When he died it paid out a fair chunk of money. He'd left half to me and half to Bobby. I put the two halves together and bought Bobby an annuity."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Insurance companies sell them," she said. "You give them a lump sum and they pay out a certain amount every month. I got one for Bobby. That's mostly what he lives on."

"Even now?"

"Yes, it lasts for life," Lara said. "Every month Bobby gets a check. It goes up a bit every year for inflation and it doesn't stop until he

dies."

Without the cost of her dad's care to worry about and with the annuity taking care of Bobby, Lara Travis was, for the first time in years, able to survive on her police salary alone. If she didn't need the mob's money, she wasn't going to take it. And there was no way she was going to do the things they were starting to ask of her.

"They wanted warnings about upcoming drug busts," she said. "One time they tried to get me to find out where a grand jury witness was being kept. I was pretty sure they wanted to kill him."

One afternoon she was parked at a 7-11 gulping down a coffee when the familiar black sedan pulled up alongside. The driver handed her an envelope, but this time she tossed it right back.

"I told him I was done," she said. "I said 'no more money; no more favors' and I drove off. I thought it was over. I went home at the end of my shift and got my first good night's sleep since it all began."

Of course, it wasn't over. Lara was up the next morning about ten o'clock, eating breakfast, brushing off her uniform, generally getting ready for the afternoon shift when three men slid open the glass door into her kitchen. The men stayed about an hour and the minute they left Lara ran to the bathroom and threw up.

"They had everything," she said. "Every single meeting had been recorded, photographed and videotaped. They'd kept records of everything I'd done for them. They even had those damned duty rosters and the printout of the license plate report."

They showed Lara everything and she knew enough about detective work to recognize a district attorney's dream corruption case when she saw one.

She had no one to turn to for help. Her parents were dead and her brother just wasn't up to the task. She'd made plenty of friends in the time she'd been in LA, but they were nearly all cops.

"I was all by myself, Rex," Lara said. "There was no way out. So I went to work for the Mafia."

In all, Lara didn't do a great deal of damage. There is a limit to how much an ordinary patrol officer can do and she used that fact as much as possible. They asked about the drug squad and she said she didn't know anyone on it. They wanted to know how a racketeering investigation was progressing and she claimed it was all being run by the feds.

"I played as dumb as I could," Lara said. "But even with that, I had to give them something. I screwed up a couple of hooker sweeps and tipped them off when a stolen car chop-shop was about to get hit. All that time, I was looking for a way out."

Eventually, she found it.

#

A small-time punk who went by the street name of Q-Ball worked Lara's patrol area. Q-Ball dealt a little dope, fenced the odd VCR and occasionally boosted a car if it wasn't too hard to get into or if the driver had been dumb enough to leave the keys inside. He was more of an annoyance than a serious criminal, but all the cops knew him because he'd lodged more excessive force complaints than any other person in the history of the LAPD.

Plenty of bad guys try to weasel out of a bust by claiming the arresting officer beat them up and quite a few actually file formal complaints, but Q-Ball made it a habit. He lodged complaint after complaint, often against cops he'd never even met. He once accused an officer in a passing black and white of opening his car door and knocking him to the ground. He said an LAPD chopper pilot tried to decapitate him with the aircraft's rotor blade. Q-Ball read the Los Angeles Times every day and routinely filed brutality charges against any officer whose name appeared in the paper.

Street cops didn't place any worth on Q-Ball's tales of police brutality, but the post-Rodney King LA force has an image problem and the brass takes every complaint seriously. One smoggy afternoon, Lara spotted Q-Ball walking out of a pawn shop and saw her chance.

She cruised after Q-Ball for about half a block until he reached a busy corner, thick with the kind of people who hate cops and would happily appear in court as a hostile witnesses. She pulled hard to the curb, fired up the roof lights and blipped the siren. By the time she climbed out of the cruiser, the entire neighborhood was watching.

Lara hauled out her Monadnoc telescoping baton, snapped it open and forced it into the small of Q-Ball's back. As he spun around, she grabbed his right hand, brought it up then down and around, in a wide arc forcing the joints against their natural bent and hustled him over to her car.

"I really didn't hurt the guy," Lara said. "But I sure made it look good."

The end result of Lara's theatrics was a parade of cop-hating street hustlers all willing to back up Q-Ball's inevitable brutality complaint. That, plus Lara's deliberately weak defense, meant the brass had no choice but to come down hard.

"So you got yourself thrown off the force?" I said.

"No," she said. "That was the plan, but it worked out even better than I'd hoped. I'd been a good cop and my Lieutenant pulled some strings. They agreed to drop the charges if I resigned."

"Which meant you could get another police job?"

"That's right," Lara said. "But when the mob checked out why I

quit the force, they'd easily find out what happened."

After she left the LAPD, the wiseguys wanted Lara to sign on with a police force in a big city where she'd be of some use to them. She applied in New York, Chicago and Detroit, but was careful to blow the interview or screw up the written test so as not to get hired. Once her criminal masters were convinced the big police departments wouldn't touch her, she went shopping for a small force as far away from the world of organized crime as she could find.

"That's how you discovered the law-abiding municipality of Boxley Cove?" I asked.

"It was perfect," she said. "Until Frankie Gannachetti came down looking for Sharkey."

"And you said you'd help him?"

"No," Lara said. "He said if I didn't help him, he'd kill my brother."

#

I really wanted a stiff drink. I settled for a hard run instead.

I ran sleek and smooth and fast. My heart was beating a drum-roll, salty sweat poured off my forehead and my lungs pumped air thick and fast like a blacksmith's bellows. If it was at all possible to work your way out of a tight spot through sheer physical exertion, I was going to do it.

I'd left Lara at the boat dock and come directly home. Frankie had warned her not to tell me anything. She was to claim he'd taken her on his boat to make sure I didn't follow. Then, having no further use for a hostage, he had dumped her at the dock. If she wanted to keep Bobby safe, Frankie said, she'd better find out where I'd stashed Sharkey Drysdale.

"If I hadn't figured all this out," I'd asked, "how long would you have gone on snitching for that guy?"

"I don't know," Lara had said. "I was trying to come up with a way out. But until I did, I had to do whatever Frankie wanted."

"Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?" I said.

"I wasn't sure what you'd do," Lara said. "I still don't."

"I should turn you over to the cops," I said, angrily. "That's what I ought to do and right now, too."

The truth was, I didn't know what to do. And as I raced along the roadway, I was still no closer to a decision.

The part of me that felt angry and betrayed wanted to toss Lara Travis to the nearest federal agent and watch her rot in a jail cell. That'll teach you to mess around with Rex Fowler, I thought, gritting my teeth and speeding up as I rounded a corner onto a paved bike path.

On the other hand, what the hell was the girl supposed to have done? It wasn't as if she'd had any choice or gotten anything out of it for herself. As far as I could see, she'd given up everything so her dad could die with a degree of decency and so her brother could have a shot at a normal life.

Maybe I should just walk away. I'd be fine without Lara. It's not as if she's the only woman in Boxley Cove. What with the girls in town and the swarms of tourists, there are plenty of women who'll jump at the chance to go out with a handsome young man who owns his own sailboat. Sharkey can look after himself, too. So he chartered NewsHound a few times. It's not like I'm married to the guy. I could easily just wash my hands of the whole God-damned thing.

Yeah, right.

#

It was late by the time I ran home, grabbed a quick shower and drove over to Lara's apartment. The lights were on, but I would have rung the bell anyway.

I knew what I wanted to tell her, but I wasn't certain how to say it. "You're, ahhh, not busted," I said, awkwardly. "I'm not going to call the cops on you."

Lara motioned me inside, but didn't say anything.

"I was pretty mad there," I said. "But I reckon you never really had a choice. I would have done the same thing if someone I loved was in danger."

Lara smiled. I tried to lighten things a little.

"Heck," I said. "If Frankie had threatened to kill you the way he threatened Bobby, I'd probably have shot Sharkey Drysdale myself."

We were seated in the living room, across from each other. Lara walked over to the couch, sat down beside me, wrapped her arms around my neck and lay her head softly on my chest. I think she was crying a little.

"I should have told you right away," she said, very softly. "I should have known I could count on you. But I was so scared. And the longer it went on, the more scared I became. But now it's too late."

"No," I said. "It's not too late. There's a way out of this. We just haven't figured it out yet. First thing, we've got to get Bobby stashed someplace safe. Then we'll see about taking on the Gannachettis."

Lara stood up and walked into the kitchen. I followed. She picked up a brown cardboard box about the size of a desk drawer and set it on the table. There was a waybill from a local quick courier company stuck on the outside with Lara's name and address in the recipient box.

"Look in there," she said, wiping a tear from her red, puffy eyes. I did. There was a plastic garbage bag inside and inside the bag, with its throat cut wide open, was Bobby Travis's cat.

"That came about an hour ago," Lara said. "Then Frankie Gannachetti called. Rex, they've got my brother."

#

Eventually, I came up with a plan.

It wasn't the greatest plan in the world, but it was all I had and it would have to do. If it worked (and I was giving it no better than a fifty-fifty chance of that) Lara would be off the hook and Sharkey would have a second try at leaving town under his own steam.

If it didn't work, they'd be scrubbing the blood off Farley Morris's Chris Craft from now until Christmas.

Lara kicked it off with a call to Frankie. Frankie bought it. He had no reason not to.

Sharkey, on the other hand, had a dozen reasons not to play along.

"Oh no, Rex Fowler," he said, when we told him what he'd have to do. "I know a short con when I see one and this scheme is so dirty it stinks."

"I know it sounds risky," Lara said, "but that stuff works. Cops swear by it."

"Unless he decides to hit my head?" Sharkey said.

"Never happen," I said, though between you and me, I wasn't all that sure. "Frankie is a goon and a crook, but he's a pro. He knows what he's doing."

"So why don't you take the hot-seat?"

"I'd be happy to, Sharkey," I said, lying through my teeth. "But Frankie Gannachetti isn't trying to kill me."

#

We hit the water in the Chris Craft about ten the next morning. We didn't want to start too early. I wanted Frankie to have plenty of time to wake up fully, have cup of coffee or two and make sure his shooting arm was nice and steady before he came a-killing. As well, we'd told him we were just out for a relaxing day of diving. If we'd gone out too early, Frankie might have got his radar up. We hadn't told anyone outside our little group about the sunken privateer and, as far as we could tell, no one but us knew. Being both mildly greedy and short of cash, I wanted to keep it that way.

We kept it easy, straight south from Boxley Cove. Last time

Frankie and the boys had sailed out to see us, they'd handled their boat like a drunken blind man with two left arms. I figured they weren't up to any fancy coastal navigation. Besides, so long as we were well out of sight and sound of the coast, it didn't matter where this went down.

It was well past noon and we were an easy hundred miles out to sea, when we heard the Cigarette boat approaching. Frankie is a full-throttle kind of guy and it certainly hadn't taken him more than two hours to get here.

After the usual bump and grind and scraping of fenders, the speedboat driver managed to get alongside long enough for me to tie the two craft together. Frankie had brought the same two goons, with the same cheesy suits and the same Mac-10s, though Frankie himself wasn't carrying one.

"This is a private tour, Frankie," I said. "I don't mind you and your guys coming aboard, but I'm going to have to charge for the extra lunches."

"Oh, you're just some fucking comedian, ain't you Fowler," Frankie said, proving that a quick wit and sparkling repartee are not Mafia job requirements.

"I do what I can, Frankie," I said. "You ready to roll here?"

Lara had been very clear with Frankie on the phone, but she went over the drill once again because ... well actually because Frankie is just so incredibly stupid.

"It goes down here, out on the water," she said. "We both get the all-clear from our shore people. Then the swap. You take out the little guy, hand over my brother, and it's a done deal."

"That's it," Frankie said. "Then we leave and you stay here. One hour. You move before that, I'll come back and take you down."

"You got it, Frankie," I said, dropping into the cheesy gangster-flick slang Lara had suddenly adopted and Frankie used all the time. "And when it's done, it's done. Lara's in the clear and we don't know you guys from the pizza boy."

"All right, enough talking," Frankie said. "Where is the little weasel?"

"He's on his way," I said. "Sit down. Relax. He'll be here."

Frankie sat and stood and sat again and stood one more time. He looked nervously around the boat and down at the water and up at the sky, perhaps thinking Sharkey was planning to fly in. He fingered the bulge under his jacket and beat a furious tattoo on the bulkhead with his fingers.

"If he doesn't show," he said, "this fucking deal is off. I'm not waiting around all day."

"Calm down, Frankie," Lara said, reasonably. "It's not even one

o'clock. You've got plenty of time to do this, sail back to land, have lunch, and still have all afternoon for your next killing."

Frankie wasn't impressed. I thought it was the funniest damn thing I'd heard in weeks.

It wasn't long before we heard, then saw, bubbles rising just off the starboard bow.

"Here he is," I said, solemnly.

We'd rigged an aluminum ladder off the side at the front of the boat and it was easy for Sharkey Drysdale, dressed from head to toe in a black Body Glove wetsuit and complete Scuba gear to climb out of the water and onto the boat's deck.

Frankie stood up and hauled a 9mm Glock out of a shoulder holster. I couldn't help thinking how popular a weapon it was. Guns-R-Us must have had a sale.

"Stay right there, Drysdale. Don't move," Frankie said. He sounded cool, calm and collected. More like a veteran street cop making a bust than a Mafia killer.

Sharkey threw both hands in the air and froze.

"Fowler, you fucking bastard," he screamed. "You fucker. You and your fucking cop-whore."

Sharkey went red in the face, spat on the deck, then slowly fell apart. He didn't move and his hands didn't drop an inch, but he was weeping like a baby. Man, I thought, Broadway lost a major talent when that boy chose a life of crime over a career on the stage. One of these days, we've got to get him to do Hamlet.

Frankie turned to Lara and me. "Okay," he said. "let's do it."

Frankie nodded at one of his men who took a cell phone from his pocket and made a call. Lara took a similar model from her jacket and did the same thing.

"Tell him we got what we came for," Frankie said, and his man did just that.

Lara looked towards Frankie. "We're ready here," she said, meaning that Becky Sutcliffe, who was down on the pier with another phone had reported that someone had turned up with Bobby Travis.

"Tell him to dump the kid," Frankie said. His man spoke into the phone and, down on the pier, Bobby was released. This, Becky duly reported.

Frankie turned to Lara, who'd been listening for word of her brother. "Happy now?" he said.

Lara nodded and two shots cracked the still air.

Frankie may be a crook, but he's a pro. No fancy shooting. No tricky stuff. Just two quick shots to the center of the visible mass, exactly like they teach cops in SWAT school. Sharkey flew off the front of the Chris Craft like he'd been blasted from a cannon. He hit the

water with a dull thudding splash and sank like a brick. Lara gasped. I swore and missed a heartbeat. Frankie didn't bat an eyelid.

"One hour, Fowler," Frankie said, as he made to leave.

"For sure," I said. "An hour, at least. And that's it. It's over."

"Yeah," Frankie said. "All done. We're out of your hair and you forget what you just saw here."

"Count on that, Frankie."

"Can I?" Frankie said, and for the first time that day I started to get really scared. "You know, I should just clean up here real nice and tidy. I pop you two and game's over. No comebacks."

"Frankie," I said. "Me, you could do easy. But the girl is a cop and that's trouble, big time. You're too smart for that."

Frankie preened. It was probably the first time in his life he'd been accused of being too smart for anything. As he climbed aboard his Cigarette boat and nodded for his men to cast off, he sneered at Lara.

"Cop," he scoffed. "Some fucking cop."

#

When Frankie and his men left, Lara and I sat down and waited.

"Do you think it worked?" she asked.

"I hope so."

"It looked like two body shots to me," Lara said. "That'll be okay."

"We'll know in a few minutes," I said. "If he's all right, he'll have heard Frankie's boat speed out of here."

We sat quietly for a couple more minutes. Then a few more. It seemed like an age. Finally, I heard a gentle lapping of water about the front bow. I stood up.

"It's all clear," I called out. "Come on up."

There was more splashing as Sharkey Drysdale climbed up the small ladder and onto the sloping forward deck of the Chris Craft.

"Man, I feel like I've been kicked by a horse," Sharkey said, as he unzipped his wetsuit and slid out the two plates of armored Kevlar that, until this morning, had formed the best part of Lara's BCPD standard-issue bulletproof vest. "Those two shots nearly knocked the wind right out of me. I thought I was never going to get my breath back."

"What were you expecting, a tickle?"

"I was too busy worrying about Frankie going for a head shot, to think about the vest," Sharkey said. "I guess I kind of imagined something like Superman's cape."

"A couple of sparks and the sound of bullets harmlessly ricocheting off your body?"

"Yeah, something like that," Sharkey said. "But it felt like I'd walked into a speeding train."

"Well, you're alive," I said. "That's the main thing."

"No. The main thing is that Frankie thinks I'm dead," Sharkey said. "That's worth a couple of kicks in the chest any day of the week."

Sharkey took another look at the mangled Kevlar plates and handed them to Lara.

"I don't want them back," she said. "They're only good for one shooting."

"So what do I do with them?"

"Do what you like," Lara answered. "But you owe me six hundred bucks for a new set."

Sharkey was about to protest when I walked up and stuck a finger through each of the two neat round holes in the wetsuit, my wetsuit, that he was wearing.

"That's a top-of-the-line Body Glove, old chum," I said. "You owe me a few hundred for that, too."

Sharkey shook his head and smiled. "I'll tell you something," he said. "It's fucking expensive getting killed around you two."

CHAPTER 12

We searched every day for the Neptune's Grace.

Lara Travis took five of the eight weeks annual holiday each Boxley Cove cop gets along with his or her exorbitantly high salary. Once she'd gotten her brother Bobby (who was surprisingly unfazed at being kidnapped by Mafia gunmen) settled back in his apartment she was eager to get out on the water.

Sharkey Drysdale's house was unlikely to be watched but, just to be on the safe side, I let him crash on my couch for the duration. He turned out to be a first-class cook and I soon got used to his exotic fare. It was a bit like having Carla Angelozzi back in town, though without the dull sex afterwards.

Sharkey had really done his research. For a guy who, other than the odd trip on my boat, had spent all his life on dry land, he sure knew a lot about searching for sunken wrecks. On our first day we carefully plotted a point "100 miles southwest of the southernmost point" as Horace Barnaby had indicated in his diaries. From that point, Sharkey plotted a complex grid search pattern that covered every square inch around that spot.

"Why not just sail out and drive around in circles?" I said, thinking of Lara and my last search effort.

"Too sloppy," Sharkey said, in the manner of someone who'd spent half his life finding old ships. "As you move further outward, the

gaps between the circular rings tend to increase. After a while, you're missing big chunks of water. We could run right by her and never know it."

The Global Positioning System was a big help. At the end of every day, we took a reading. The following morning we just drove out and picked up where we'd left off. All in all, it was very organized, very methodical and, frankly, very boring.

It took some effort to get all our search gear aboard. We weren't planning to sleep on the boat, so we didn't need sleeping gear or lots of supplies, but it was still a tight squeeze. Most treasure hunters don't go out in a 32-foot pleasure craft, but we didn't have a choice. A bigger boat would mean a bigger crew and the fewer people who knew what we were up to, the better.

The side-scan sonar took up the most space. We were using a Sea Scan made by an outfit called Marine Sonic Technology out of White Marsh, VA, wherever the hell that is.

It's a nifty piece of gear and a lot cheaper than most, which was both a blessing and a curse. Part of the cost savings come from using an ordinary personal computer instead of a dedicated processor, so we had to find somewhere to keep a box, a monitor and a keyboard. We ended up ripping out the bunk bed cushions and fitting the unit there. It was easy to get at, but well protected from shaking, salty spray and a clumsy crew.

Once we got it installed, it worked like a charm. Just drop the yellow sending unit over the side and cruise along slowly. The Sea Scan fires sonic waves sideways into the water and sends back pictures to the computer screen. Aside from the funny colors, the pictures could be photographs.

"How far does this work?" I asked, as Sharkey strapped the computer box to the cabin bunk.

"It's rated for up to 500 yards," he said. "But things get hazy out that far. We're going to narrow that down to about a hundred yards and bump up the resolution. It means we cover less ground per day, but it'll save us a lot of useless diving."

The magnetometer wasn't nearly so fancy, but it was a lot more rugged. We were using a Barringer M-244, which immediately struck me as a really cool name for a line of handguns. There wasn't a lot to it that I could see, a big box about the size of a twenty-one inch TV with four grip handles on the front. The box hooked up to a black cable with what looked to me like a plastic bell on the end.

"So it's just a big honking metal detector?" I said. "Something like what those beachcombers use to find lost watches and washed up old coins?"

"It's a little more sophisticated than that," said Sharkey, sounding

offended, as if he'd designed and built the thing from scratch in his basement. "But you're right, it's a metal detector."

And that's what we did, day after day. We cruised along at about ten knots with the magnetometer streaming off the stern and the sonar unit dangling over the side. We took turns driving the boat, watching the computer screen and sitting next to the magnetometer checking the reading.

It was nearly as exciting as walking along the beach with a metal detector, though without the possibility of meeting a gaggle of bikini-clad college girls on vacation.

For all our fancy high tech gear, we had plenty of false alarms. The first few times that the magnetometer recorded a hit or the sonar produced a likely looking image, we got terribly excited. I, in fact, took the very first false alarm to mean our search was over.

"Okay, that's it," I said, struggling into my diving gear. "We've got her. Hit the GPS Sharkey. Mark the spot. Yahoo boys and girls! We're rich!"

It turned out to be two leaky oil drums. From then on, I was a lot less hasty.

It's incredible just how much crap there is on the ocean floor. We found plenty more oil drums, probably dumped by unscrupulous companies who'd rather toss out their toxic waste than pay to have it removed. We found dozens of abandoned boat anchors, pieces of World War II aircraft bombs and Navy shells, metal chairs, small barbecues, a couple of typewriters and literally hundreds of small hand tools.

One day, we actually found a car, a mid-70s Ford Pinto lying on the sea bed a hundred miles from the nearest land. We spent hours trying to guess how it got there.

"Must have lost control and sped off the road," Sharkey said.

"We're a long way from any road."

"Maybe the driver took a run at it. He could have built up speed."

"In a Pinto?"

"I'll bet you, its the mob," Sharkey said. "Some mob boss got knocked off and they dumped him in his car."

"Sharkey, how many mob bosses drive subcompact cars?" Lara said, laughing. "A big black Caddy, or a stretch Lincoln, maybe. But no Mafia kingpin ever drove a two-door base-model Ford Pinto."

Eventually we all agreed that the car had been cruising peacefully along the coast when it had been picked up by an alien space ship on a reconnaissance mission from the planet Gooptar. After subjecting the driver to a lengthy series of bizarre medical experiments, the two-headed, three-eyed, little green men had dumped the car in the water and sped off.

Having solved that little mystery, we bade farewell to the sunken Pinto and resumed our search.

#

By day nine we'd settled into a routine. We'd worked out most of the bugs in our gear and established a search pattern. We hadn't been at it long enough to become disillusioned. In fact, we were pretty optimistic, all things considered. Still, the initial feeling of excitement and adventure had begun to wear off.

The Boxley Cove Police Department helicopter passed overhead moving fast.

"Air One?" I said to Lara.

"Looks like it," she said. "A bit far out, though."

"Well he's after something," I said.

"Somebody probably dropped their wallet," Lara said, "and Chief Flockett wants to grab it."

I'd brought a cooler full of sandwiches made with Hettie Jenkins's light rye bread, a fresh Honeydew melon and a new type of coffee. We lingered over lunch and didn't get back at the search until well after one o'clock.

Half an hour later the metal detector started wailing like a banshee. Sharkey dashed over to the machine and started fiddling with the keypad. He'd become something of a magnetometer expert in the time we'd been at sea. Lara brought the boat to a stop and punched the Global Positioning System to record our exact latitude and longitude. I set to work on the side-scan sonar, trying to bring up an image.

"It's something big," Sharkey called out. "At least the size of that Pinto."

"Not another car?"

"I don't think so," Sharkey said. "Different mix of metal. It's hard to tell."

"I'm not getting anything," I said. "Can you get any sort of a direction off that thing?"

Sharkey played some more and decided whatever we'd found was probably astern of us. I narrowed the sonar scan and ran the range as far out as I could, but got nothing. The water in the Gulf of Mexico looks nice and blue on the surface, but it's actually pretty murky. The side-scan sonar was a great piece of gear but no amount of technology could cut through all that muck. It was like a man with excellent vision trying to look through fog. All he sees is the fog, though he sees it much more clearly than most. We'd have to get closer.

Sharkey hauled in the magnetometer cable so it wouldn't get

tangled and Lara turned the boat around and moved slowly forward. I peered at the screen.

"Okay, I got something!" I yelled, at last.

Sharkey was looking over my shoulder at the image on the computer screen.

"Something pointy," he said. "Maybe part of a bow?"

Lara maneuvered the boat and we passed over the site a few times, but the picture didn't improve.

"We'll have to go down," I said, but Sharkey was already strapping on his tanks.

#

Sharkey Drysdale dives like I make love. Plenty of enthusiasm and more stamina than most but, frankly, not a lot of finesse. Of the three of us, he got by far the least dive time out of a set of tanks.

I was behind him, swimming through the mess of debris he'd kicked up with his ungainly style. It didn't take long to reach our target and when we did it was immediately clear what we'd found.

It was a mid-sized, twin-engined light aircraft, probably a Beechcraft, though I don't claim to be any kind of an airplane expert. The pointy thing we'd thought might be a ship's bow was actually the outer half of the port side wing. It had broken, hinged upward and moved toward the rear of the plane where it overlapped the tail. The two together had looked on my sonar screen like one large object.

Judging by the state of the aircraft and the amount of growth on her sheet metal, she'd likely not been in the water much more than a year or two. Sharkey and I swam closer. The windows were foggy, but I could see there were no bodies inside.

I tapped Sharkey and pointed to the tail. The aircraft's call numbers had been painted over and a new set added. To me, that meant just one thing. We'd found a downed drug runner. Probably came in low, hoping to skim under the radar and drop her load at any one of the hundreds of landing spots along the coast. She must have been jumped by the DEA or a Navy interdiction plane. The pilot likely ditched and got out before she sank. Happens all the time on the Gulf Coast. The drug cops call incidents like that a victory for the good guys. For the baddies, though, it's just another cost of doing business.

Sharkey swam around to the side and tried the door handle. It didn't open right away and he started hauling on it. I swam up, tapped him on the shoulder and shook my head. I made a neck-cutting motion with my hand and pointed towards the surface. Sharkey looked displeased, so I did it again.

We came up alongside the Chris Craft.

"Rex," Sharkey said, but I cut him off.

"No," I said, firmly. "No way. That's not what we're here for."

Sharkey didn't look happy, but he seemed to realize there was no point in arguing.

"I agree," Lara said, when we told her what it was. "Sunken treasure, I can go for. But we've got no business with drugs."

"You're probably right," Sharkey said. "We're better off out of that game."

We took off our Scuba gear and wetsuits. As Sharkey moved forward to stow his gear, I saw him punch the position button on the GPS. Just before we moved off to resume our search, I did the same.

#

We found nothing else of interest that day and got back to the pier as the sun was settling down for the evening. Farley Morris was waiting as we tied the Chris Craft alongside. I had to fuel up the boat and run through a few basic maintenance drills so I asked Lara to drive Sharkey up to my place while Farley and I took care of the boat.

Lara agreed and Sharkey shot me an odd look which he dropped quickly when he saw me checking him out. As they left the boat, I noticed Sharkey had his dive gear with him.

"A little night diving on your agenda, Shark?" I said.

"Naa," he said, casually. "Routine cleaning and maintenance. Just like the boat."

Lara and Sharkey drove off. Farley and I fueled up the boat and, less than half an hour after we'd arrived, I was back on the water. I pulled a scrap of paper from my pocket. I'd noted down the position fix I'd taken off the GPS and I wanted to make sure I still had it.

The GPS isn't quite the pinpoint unit people think it is. It's accurate to about 50 yards, which is close enough for most people. The military versions are good to about two feet, but they cost a fortune and your first name has to be Sergeant before you can get your hands on one.

I drove the boat out to the spot I'd marked, streamed the magnetometer over the stern and, after twenty minutes of slow cruising, found what I was looking for. I dropped the tiny joke of an anchor the Chris Craft comes with, hustled into my diving gear and slipped over the side.

Diving alone is really stupid. It's even more stupid than leaving an expensive boat bobbing about the water with nobody aboard. The first thing they teach you at Scuba school is, dive with a buddy. Trouble was, I didn't have a buddy and I had to dive.

I don't know who invented the quartz-halogen light, but I owe him

a drink. I carry a fifteen-watt LR-815 from Intelligent Scuba. It's a beautiful piece of kit, a gift from a former girlfriend who seemed to think my birthday called for something more than a tie or a pair of slippers. It looks like a fat police baton and works like Luke Skywalker's light saber. Every time I twist the knurled ring at the back and watch the stream of light shoot out the front I catch myself humming *Blinded By the Light* by Manfred Mann. I love the thing, though try as I might I can not remember the name of the girl who gave it to me.

I stayed further off the sea bed this time. With a light like mine, I couldn't afford to shake up sand and debris, all of which would reflect the beam right back at me. I swam patterns, sweeping the light back and forth, humming *Light Fever*, a sort-of Bee Gees song I'd adapted from the *Saturday Night Fever* original.

The downed Beechcraft was right where we'd left it. I swam closer, huddled on the wing and shone my beam outwards to make sure I was alone. Satisfied, I stuck the LR-815's handle in my belt and pulled out what was really just a crowbar with a rubberized grip, but cost six times what it should have because I bought it in a dive shop instead of at Sears. I jammed the crowbar in the aircraft door, levered the sharp end back and watched as the door popped open. Like I said at Sharkey's house, I could do break-and-enters for a living.

The door latch looked wrecked but I have a visceral fear of being trapped underwater so, just to be on the safe side, I slid the crowbar between the front of the door and the outer bulkhead and popped the bottom hinge clear off. I have no wish to be buried at sea, especially while I'm still alive.

The aircraft's interior was furnished in early classic drug runner chic. A couple of expensive-looking radar units had obviously been fitted and somebody had replaced the standard altimeter with the kind of top-of-the-line model needed when most of your flying is done ten feet above water in pitch darkness. The rear seats had been ripped out and the back bulkhead cut out and moved as far back as it would go. The cardboard boxes, shrink-wrapped in plastic and jammed in behind the pilot's seat, showed why.

I moved inside the cabin. My quartz light bounced off every surface giving the cockpit a hot, white glow. I moved carefully towards the rear, yanked my diver's knife from its ankle holster and stabbed it into the nearest box. As I did, water rushed in turning the dry white powder inside into a pasty mush. I could have slashed open every box, but wet cocaine can easily be dried out. I had a better idea.

I pushed carefully at the boxes until I'd forced an opening about the size of a large clenched fist. From a black canvas sack velcroed to my belt I took out a gray metal cylinder, eighteen inches long and

about the diameter of a quarter.

Underwater explosive devices don't come with fancy names like handguns and sports cars. The model in my hand was made by a company in England called Patterson-Hewitt Devices Inc. and was more than likely stolen. You can buy them legally, but you have to fill in all sorts of forms proving you're a treasure hunter and not, say, a foreign terrorist or an aspiring Unabomber. As soon as you do, the state knows that you've found a wreck and they come looking for their share. As the state share is roughly one hundred percent of whatever you bring up, we decided to buy our explosives through alternate channels. Sharkey had hooked me up with a greasy little guy with a runny nose who sold guns and bombs. I'd bought two, just to test them out. If we needed more, Mr. Runny promised he could supply up to three dozen on twenty-four hours notice which was very convenient if a little scary.

The Patterson-Hewitt people make a lovely little bomb. You simply break off a plastic safety cap, twist the circular ring at the end of the unit, stick in into a hole and swim away. Thirty minutes later it goes off.

That's exactly what I did. I dropped the timed explosive smack in the middle of half a million bucks worth of cocaine and swam back to the Chris Craft which, mercifully, was still more or less where I'd parked it.

I waited the thirty minutes, heard the satisfying whump of a job well done and set course for home.

#

Sharkey wasn't there. There was a note on my kitchen table. "Gone for a walk," it said. "Don't wait up. Sharkey Drysdale." Nice of him to put his last name, I thought? Saves me wondering which of my many friends named Sharkey it could be.

There was some lasagna left in the fridge. I popped it in the microwave, set the timer for fifty minutes instead of five and realized my mistake twenty minutes later. By the time I got to it, my Italian dinner looked like a chunk of lava rock. I tossed it out and settled for a slab of cheese and a handful of raisins.

TV was offering a choice between Inside Edition, SportsChat and really dumb movie starring Michael Jordan and a bunch of cartoon characters. I switched off and went to bed.

I woke up at 3:27:34 according to the digital alarm clock on my bedside table. Somebody was walking around my living room. It was either Sharkey, a burglar, or somebody come to kill me. My money was on Sharkey, but I was too tired to care and went back to sleep.

"You look exhausted," I said to Sharkey the next morning. "Tiring work cleaning your Scuba gear and going for a walk, isn't it?"

"Mmmm, I am tired," he answered, pouring himself a huge mug of coffee. "I've been thinking we should take a day or two off. You know, rest up a little."

"Give you a chance to get back out and see if you can find it this time?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"It's all gone, Shark," I said. "I blew it up. There's nothing down there but a whole bunch of stoned fish."

Sharkey sighed.

"You know you just threw away a fortune," he said. "What if we don't find the Neptune's Grace? That plane could have set us up."

"I don't care," I said. "I don't care if we search all year and never find that ship. I am not dealing drugs."

#

The day was a complete bust. What with my little bombing expedition and Sharkey having spent half the night searching for a recently vaporized airplane, it was all the two of us could do to keep our eyes open.

"Boy, you two aren't exactly bright-eyed and bushy tailed this morning, are you?" Lara said, mid-way through our first chorus of yawns.

She was at the wheel. I was sitting next to the metal detector and Sharkey had his head down on the bunk beside the sonar unit. We'd been searching for an hour without a single contact.

"I didn't get a lot of sleep last night," I said.

"Me neither," said Sharkey, his eyes pleading with me not to tell Lara what he'd done.

"You boys go out last night or something?" Lara said.

"No," I said. "We didn't do anything. We're just a bit tired. Nothing to worry about."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," I said, chuckling. "We are treasure hunting professionals. Highly skilled ocean explorers. Masters of the deep blue sea. We may not be at our most perky, but you can still count on us to get the job done."

"I was just wondering ..." Lara said.

"Wondering what?"

"I was wondering which one of you two highly skilled treasure hunting professionals was planning to switch on the magnetometer."

We ate lunch early and by the time we'd finished none of us felt

like getting back to work. We decided to call it a day, get a good night's sleep and start fresh the following morning.

#

Lara took off in her car to see Bobby. Sharkey and I climbed in my Land Rover and set out for my bungalow.

My place is mostly surrounded by trees, but as you approach from the dock there's a gap in the woods where you can see the front drive. Passing the gap, I thought I saw something that shouldn't be there. I slowed down and cruised past my driveway.

"Shit!" I said.

Sharkey saw where I was looking, but by the time he swung his head around, we'd passed the driveway.

"What?" he said.

"Two cars," I said. "Base-model Crown Vic and a plane-jane Lumina."

"Cops," Sharkey said.

"Looks like."

"What do they want with us?"

"They're probably only interested in me," I said. "Chief Flockett reckons I'm some sort of a drug dealer. They're just hassling me."

"Let's get out of here, then."

"No," I said. "It's a routine thing. He hassles. I get hassled. But I'd just as soon not bring you along."

I pulled over to the side of the road. From where I'd stopped, you could see the entry to my house. I grabbed a packet of sandwiches left over from lunch and handed them to Sharkey.

"You're going to have to play Boy Scout in the bushes for an hour or two," I said. "Wait until you see Flockett's boys leave, then come in. Or just hang out here and I'll come and get you."

"What are you going to do?" Sharkey said.

"I'm going to go home and have my civil rights violated."

I pulled into my driveway as nonchalantly as I could, hopped out of the Land Rover and walked in through my unlocked door. I had four visitors, all beefy guys in dark suits.

"Glad you could make it, boys, I said. "You know, I didn't get the party invitations in the mail until Monday and I was worried they'd arrive too late."

They didn't say a word so I just kept on babbling.

"You guys are a bit early," I said. "No one else is here yet. But there's beer in the fridge and plenty of food so just make yourself at home. Whattaya say we crank up the tunes and kick things off right now, huh?"

"You're a fucking laugh a minute," one of my guests said, without laughing.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get it done with. Show me the warrant then search away."

"We're not here to search the house," the same man said. Clearly, he was the boss.

"Oh, well, that's a relief," I said, waving my hand across the world's messiest living room. "As you can see, I've just had the maid in and I'd hate for you guys to wreck the place."

"Let's go," the man said. "Somebody wants to see you."

"Wants to see me?" I said. "He usually comes himself."

All four men looked at me.

"I think he likes to watch his boys give me a hard time."

No response. More confused looks.

"Chief Flockett?" I said. "Cyrus R. Flockett?"

The name didn't seem to ring any bells.

"You guys aren't BCPD, are you?" I said.

"No."

"What then?" I asked. "State? Fed? Let's see some badges."

The leader, the only one who'd done any talking, laughed.

"We're not cops, Mr. Fowler," he said. "We're the bad guys."

#

The Station House is the nicest hotel in Boxley Cove. It's small, only thirty rooms plus a restaurant and two piano bars, and built like an old Victorian inn. It's also the most expensive hotel in town, but when you're a Mafia kingpin, I guess you can afford it.

Vittorio Gannachetti had taken an entire floor.

He didn't look anything like his younger brother. Where Frankie was stocky and thug-like, Vittorio was tall and elegant, with Patrician features. He dressed better, too. No shiny suits and greasy hair. The elder Gannachetti wore a dark gray suit of the sort that costs more than a small car and never comes completely in or goes completely out of fashion. His conservatively styled salt-and-pepper hair and wire-rimmed glasses completed the bank president / state senator / airline pilot look.

"Mr. Fowler," he said. "Please come in."

"You are Vittorio Gannachetti?" I said.

"I am."

"You don't look, ahhh ..."

"What were you expecting, Mr. Fowler? Marlon Brando?"

"Well," I said. "Yeah. Kinda."

He laughed and padded over to a small bar.

"What can I offer you?" he said. "There is a rather good cognac and a decent single malt. Or if you prefer ..."

"Nothing for me, thanks."

"Oh, come now," he said. "Don't be that way."

"It's not you," I said. "I used to have a little trouble with booze."

"You're an alcoholic?"

"Used to be," I said. "Though I'm sure you're not interested in my personal history."

"Oh, but I am," Gannachetti said. "That's why you're here. I want to find out what sort of a chap you are."

"Chap," I thought to myself. Outside of David Niven movies, I don't think I've ever heard anyone use the word chap.

"I understand you have some sort of an agreement with my younger brother," Gannachetti said. "It concerns me."

"How so?"

"It has been my experience that people who promise to keep our secrets often end up in witness boxes."

"You're worried that we'll tell the cops that Frankie shot Sharkey Drysdale?" I said. "You're trying to decide whether to honor the deal or just have us killed?"

"Something like that."

"But you have a fair bit of dirt on us," I said, pointing to two of Gannachetti's thugs standing discreetly off to the side with their right hands tucked inside their suit jackets. "Not to mention an almost inexhaustible supply of men in black."

"True," he said. "But dirt can be cleansed. And the federal authorities have men of their own."

"It probably would be more efficient to get rid of us," I said. "But sooner or later, this killing has to stop."

"It is bad for business," Gannachetti said. "And expensive, too."

"And I don't think it's really your style, is it?" I said.

"No," he said. "I've never cared for gunplay. It's much too ..."

"Marlon Brando?"

"Exactly."

"I can give you my word, none of this will come back on you or your brother," I said. "People say I keep my word."

"That's what I'm told," Gannachetti said.

"And if I don't," I said. "You can always kill me later."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," he said. "One of my 'men in black' will drive you home."

As I turned to leave, I was relieved to see that Gannachetti's men had dropped their hands from their shoulder holsters. One had a set of car keys in his hand and was pointing towards the exit.

"One more thing, Mr. Gannachetti," I said, as I left. "Next time

you want to see me, just call."

"I do apologize for your abduction, Mr. Fowler," he said, with just the hint of a twinkle in his eye. "But I'm afraid it's not good for our image to be calling people up and asking if they would mind dropping by. We're supposed to be ruthless mobsters, you know."

CHAPTER 13

Four weeks later we found the ship. It was just as well, we were just about to give up hope.

Actually, that's not true. But when you find something after a long search, you're supposed to say you were about to give up. It's more dramatic that way. Makes for a better story when you're interviewed on Larry King.

In truth though, all three of us were still plenty full of piss and vinegar. We were bubbling with enthusiasm, partly due to the possibility of finding untold wealth and partly due to the fact that a full twenty-one days had passed without anyone trying to kill us. If we hadn't found the Neptune's Grace when we did, we'd certainly have kept going.

But if Larry asks, I'm sticking with my "we were about to give up" story.

That's not to say searching had become any more exciting. It was still the same old routine. Sail out to where we'd finished the day before. Stream the magnetometer off the stern and drop the sonar over the side. Drive along in a straight line, watching the machines, hoping for a hit. When you get one, two divers go over and check it out. Routine stuff but with just the remotest possibility of excitement. Sort of like being a cop at Disneyland.

I saw the police department helicopter off in the distance and thought to myself how quick and easy it would be if we had one of those. Then Air One moved off and my thoughts did as well.

Seconds later, the magnetometer shrieked and the needle started bouncing around like an enthusiastic Rolling Stones fan stuck way back in the cheap seats.

"Actually," Sharkey Drysdale said, tapping the side-scan sonar's monitor screen. "We may have found it. This looks really good."

It looked very good. Sharkey had narrowed the sonar's beam until it covered less than three degrees. Our contact was directly astern of us and loaded with metal, if the magnetometer was to be believed.

"It looks like a big bump," Lara Travis said. "It doesn't look much like a ship."

"If we are, in fact, looking at the Neptune's Grace," Sharkey said, "then it's turned turtle."

"Turtle?"

"Upside down," Sharkey said.

"Which means?"

"Good news and bad news," Sharkey said. "Good news is she seems to be in one piece. So her cargo has probably not broken out and been spread all over the ocean."

"And the bad news?"

"Unless there is a really convenient break in the hull," he answered, "we're going to have to blast our way in."

"So what do we do now?" I asked, but I knew the answer. I was already struggling into my Scuba gear. We dived on rotation to spread the workload. Lara and I were up next. Lara was getting dressed for the deep as well.

"Go down, check it out," Sharkey said. "Make sure it's not just a bump in the sea bed or another fucking Ford Pinto."

We were excited. Too excited. Lara managed to screw up something on her J-valve and had to fiddle around with it before she was set to dive. It took me three tries to get a decent seal on my mask and I lost a fin half-way down because I hadn't strapped it on properly. We should have taken a breather and relaxed some before diving, but we didn't. Who would?

By the time we reached the wreck, Lara and I had calmed down. But once we saw her, we got excited all over again. Lara looked at me and grinned. I answered with a clenched fist and a pumping motion, the old U.S. Cavalry signal for "charge." We sliced through the water like sharks after a dolphin.

Two barracudas swam by then circled to watch. They were about four feet long, but looked larger, like everything else underwater. I wasn't concerned. Barracudas look mean because they chomp their jaws as they breath, but they don't bother divers and are scared off easily. I kind of like having them around.

Up close, Neptune's Grace didn't look much like a ship. When Sharkey talked about her being a "bump in the sea bed" he was a lot closer to the truth than he knew.

She'd turned turtle on her way down and landed on the ocean floor, deck first. If any of her masts had survived the hurricane they had certainly been snapped clean off when she hit bottom. Either that, or they'd been driven deep into the ground.

After nearly four hundred years under water, the ship's hull was fouled almost beyond recognition. Rust had attacked the nails holding down her copper sheathing and chunks of it had lifted off and been carried away. What little sheathing remained was oxidized to a sickly green color and covered, like the rest of the hull, with a thick layer of barnacles, seaweed and algae. I guessed that if you could somehow

find a way to remove the ship whole, the accumulated growth would, on its own, make a perfectly serviceable hull.

With her upper deck flat against the ocean floor, all her entry hatches were useless to us. I set about looking for a way in. Lara and I made a few close passes over the keel, but if there were any convenient holes, we didn't see them.

Next to a nice big round hole, a gun port would make a handy entrance, but they seemed to be covered as well. The impact and nearly four centuries of shifting had buried most of them. But I only needed one. The ship looked to be down slightly at the front and to the left side so I swam around to the right hand side of the ship near the back, what we sailors call the starboard quarter. There I found one exposed gun port.

It was half buried, but part of it was clear. The wooden hatch was shut and covered with the same mess of barnacles as the rest of the poor ship. I chipped away enough to make sure of what I'd found. Lara heard the noise, swam over and realized instantly what we had. We gave each other a thumbs-up sign and swam up to tell Sharkey all about it.

Sharkey didn't want to hear all about it. He wanted to see for himself. If Lara and I had been over-eager to dive on the wreck, Sharkey Drysdale was bouncing around like a kid on Christmas morning. When we broke the surface, he was already suited-up and ready to go.

Lara stayed on the boat while Sharkey and I dived. I showed him the exposed gun port. He didn't give me a thumbs up. He didn't look happy at all.

"We can't use the gun port," he said later, when we were all aboard the Chris Craft.

"Why not?" I asked. "It'll take a bit of work, but I'm sure we can do it."

"Oh, we could get in all right," Sharkey said. "It's once we're inside, I'm worried about. What if something shifts in there? If that gun port got blocked with one of us in the ship, he or she would run out of air long before we could get him out. We should have two entry holes before anyone goes inside."

"So we blast our way in?" I said.

"There is no other way."

"I suppose I'd better pay Mr. Runny another visit," I said.

"Mr. Runny?" Lara asked.

"Sort of the Wal-Mart of bombs."

Blowing holes in the bottom of an old ship isn't nearly as much fun as it sounds.

Sharkey wanted two entry holes in the upturned hull, one forward and one aft. Each one took a full day's strenuous diving. It was the same thing over and over - drill a two-inch wide hole through nearly twelve inches of solid oak, slide in one of Mr. Runny's explosive charges, surface while it blows, go down with axes, hack away the debris, repeat if necessary.

I burned off a couple of million calories just placing the charges. We used the world's biggest hand drill, more of an auger really. It took two divers to work it. One pressed the cutting bit hard against the hull (tough to do underwater, I'll say) while the other cranked the thing round and round until the bit broke through.

"Isn't there some kind of power tool we can use?" I asked. "This is really primitive."

"Oh, sure," Sharkey said. "Stanley makes a really nice little hand-held unit. Only weighs about six pounds."

"That's more like it."

"Of course, we'll need an hydraulic power unit," he said. "That's about 250 pounds, plus the weight of the fuel, say another five."

"All right," I said. "I see your point."

"Then there's three hundred feet of heavy duty pressure hose," he said. "I don't know how much that weighs."

"Okay. Okay. I give up."

"Let's see, figure the hose weighs nine ounces a foot. That's just about one pound per ..."

"Forget it, Sharkey!" I said, adjusting my face mask. "Just shut up and give me the fucking auger."

Chopping away at the hole with an ax was no bed of roses either. It reminded me of those nightmares where everything moves in slow motion and you can't seem to get a grip on things and eventually you wake up short of breath and sweating bullets. It was like that, but wetter.

Finally, we had two nice neat holes each about the size of a roadway manhole, one forward roughly where the boatswain's stores would have been and one back aft at the powder room. We also had a full case of Patterson-Hewitt timed explosives left over and I recall thinking how exciting our Fourth of July party would be this year.

With the holes done, all we had to do was swim inside a pitch dark, upside down, sunken ship that was likely damaged beyond recognition, find some sort of treasure, bring it back out and haul it to the surface.

Piece of cake, I thought to myself. We'll be home in time for dinner.

#

Lara and Sharkey were next on the rotation and went in first. I made a feeble protest that Lara should wait until we'd checked it out, but she wouldn't hear of it. I knew it was a non-starter, but you have to try. It's a guy thing. Like popping the hood when the car breaks down even though you don't know the first damn thing about fixing engines.

Sharkey was a nut for safety. The two divers entered Neptune's Grace through the forward hole, trailing a length of bright yellow polypropylene rope. Each carried an eight-cell UK 1200 diver's light (not sexy looking like my light, but just as bright and only one-third the price) and a Princeton Tec strobe strapped to their ankle.

I looked at my watch every thirty seconds while they were down. Sharkey had said they'd be in the water for three-quarters of an hour. My plan was to give them forty-five minutes plus four seconds grace. If they didn't show up by then, I was going after them. I was twenty seconds away from diving when they broke the surface. The BCPD chopper passed overhead. Nobody waved.

"How's she look?" I asked, when they'd got aboard.

"Not bad. Not bad," Sharkey said. "Much better than I expected."

"There's a lot of junk floating around in there," Lara said. "It's like fog, but darker."

"That's normal," Sharkey explained. "There was all sorts of stuff in that ship when she went down - rope, sails, food, clothing, gunpowder, not to mention a whole bunch of unlucky sailors. By now most of it has decomposed and turned to mush."

"Can you see, though?" I asked. "Or are we going to have to pump it out?"

"No, it's too big a job to pump it out. If we're careful and we don't stir up too much of a mess, we'll be able to see what we're doing."

"And the rest of the ship?"

"It looks as if the main-mast and the mizzen-mast broke off in the storm, before the ship went down," Sharkey said. "There's very little damage in the middle and to the rear of the ship. But the fore-mast was still standing when she hit bottom and it broke up a lot of the decking."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"It'll slow us down a bit," Sharkey said. "We'll have to clean up some of the mess before we start swimming around it. I think we should search that part of the ship last. If we find what we want before we get there, we can just forget about the forward sections."

"Everything else look okay?"

"The foremast was the only major problem that I could see," Sharkey said. "But remember, that ship turned herself upside down and hit the ground with a big bump. All kinds of heavy things will have been bounced around inside and settled where they're not supposed to be."

"What you're saying is Neptune's Grace could be one big booby trap," Lara said.

"It won't be that bad," Sharkey said. "But this isn't some tourist-trap wreck that's been dived on for decades. We're the first people to go inside this ship. If there is anything in there that can kill or injure a diver, we're going to be the ones to find it."

#

We were very, very careful. Like all smart divers, we went down in pairs. It's the golden rule. The "buddy system" has saved a lot of lives over the years and we weren't about to break with a good thing.

Sharkey had a few rules of his own, all of which he adamantly enforced and all of which we willingly obeyed. Each diver carried a short ax as well as a serrated Scuba knife. We wore strobe lights strapped to our ankles. Our tanks were good for eighty minutes, but Sharkey insisted that no more than fifty minutes elapsed from over the side to breaking surface. That gave us a half-hour safety margin if anything went wrong.

Before we could start searching for sunken goodies, we had to prepare the ship. It took us two full days.

We went in through the entry hole at the rear of the ship. Using the back of his ax as a hammer, Sharkey nailed one end of a coil of yellow polypropylene rope to the hull near the hole. With me close behind, he slipped inside the ship and went straight down until he found a hatchway leading to the middle deck. He nailed the rope to a bulkhead near the hatch and slipped through. After some more searching, we found a hatchway to the gun deck. We nailed the rope, swam through until we hit bottom and nailed it again. Sharkey hauled out his knife, cut the rope, looked at me and tapped his watch. Time to get out.

Sharkey's plan was cleverly simple. Attach one rope running straight down, passing through all three decks. On each deck, from the vertical rope, run a horizontal rope along the deck, the length of the ship. Once the ropes are in place, clip battery-powered strobes every twenty feet along the ropes. We used underwater strobes that flash every half-second, run for hours on two small batteries and cost less than twenty-five bucks. Cheap insurance, Sharkey said.

As the diver enters the ship, he switches on each strobe as he

passes. When he gets near the area he wants to work, he clips another yellow rope, the end of which is already fastened to his belt, to the nearest rope. It's almost impossible to get lost, but if he does, he just follows the yellow rope and flashing strobes until he's out. And he does get stuck and need help, the rescue diver can easily find him by doing the same thing in reverse.

"That's an excellent way to do it, Sharkey," Lara said, when he first outlined his plan. "Where did you hear of it?"

"Actually, I thought it up myself," he said. "I remembered that old fairy tale."

"Hansel and Gretel?"

"That's the one," he said. "A wicked witch leads them deep into the woods, but they suspect a trap so they drop a trail of breadcrumbs to mark their way out."

"I hate to be a party-pooper," I said, being a party-pooper, "but didn't a bird come along behind them and eat up all the bread?"

"Yeah," Sharkey said. "He did. I guess there is a moral in there someplace."

"Maybe no matter how hard you plan, something always goes wrong?"

"Could be," he said. "But I'm getting a good feeling that nothing is going to go wrong."

Something went wrong.

#

We'd been down about thirty minutes, Lara and I, on the middle deck about as far forward as we planned to go. It was a mess. I don't know what had been in the compartment, but whatever it was had decomposed to a mushy, thick floating paste that looked like that fluff you get in a clothes dryer and cut visibility down to almost nothing. As well, the fore-mast had broken up parts of the forward bulkhead and dozens of twenty-pound cannon balls had broken through from the shot locker and ripped up the decking. We should have left that compartment alone, but after two accident-free days preparing the safety rigging and another day and a half searching, we'd gotten a bit cocky.

I was at the back of the room, Lara was someplace else. I couldn't see her. I couldn't see her safety rope. Hell, I couldn't even see my safety rope.

I was working as much by feel as by sight, moving slowly, trying not to stir up too much crap. Something, I don't know what, maybe intuition or a sixth-sense or just plain old luck, made me turn around.

A violent stream of air bubbles rose out of the mush, hit the

decking, fought its way along the gently sloping wall and disappeared out the nearest hatch. Our Scuba tanks carry eighty cubic feet of air under three-thousand pounds of pressure. I knew where those bubbles were coming from.

I knew, but I couldn't see. Lara must have been thrashing about. There was more of that wet fluff in the water than usual. I lunged forward, kicking like a madman and only succeeded in adding to the mess. Sharks and giant squids make for great movies, but in real life panic kills more divers than any underwater hazard. Time to calm down and work out a plan.

Follow the bubbles. I remembered some children's movie from decades ago. A clown with a big hat and a really lame French accent was singing "follow zee bubbles, follow zee bubbles." He managed to make "bubbles" last four syllables and all the kids laughed.

I unclipped my safety rope and followed the bubbles. I couldn't see where they were coming from so I just swam into the stream and worked backwards. It worked perfectly. I couldn't see Lara, but I was getting closer all the time.

The bubbles stopped.

I spun my head around and peered out my mask as the last drop of Lara Travis's air went spinning out the ship and headed for the surface. I could feel the panic setting in. I fought it like a drunk trying to hold off the booze long enough to drive home.

Think hard. Calm down and work it out. Bubbles want out. They leave Lara, move up, hit the deck, travel along the deck and escape. Unless they hit something, they travel in straight lines. I was alongside the deck. If I traveled in a straight line I should end up directly above Lara.

I swam carefully, slowly, trying not to alter course. I don't know if you can improve your eyesight by sheer force of will, but I tried that day. I stopped and peered below at what may have been a flashing strobe or may have been my panicky imagination playing tricks. If I went for it and it was Lara, she had a chance. If I went for it and it wasn't Lara, I'd never find her.

I went for it. It was Lara.

Closer, I could see it was her ankle strobe. I lunged out and grabbed it. Her whole body was writhing in panic. I held on to her ankle, drew myself closer and ran my hand up her leg and buttocks and up her back until my arm was around her shoulders. Fine time to cop a feel Fowler, you old pervert, I thought to myself, which is an odd thing to be thinking considering the circumstances.

Anyone who's seen the James Bond movies, knows what I did next. I took a deep breath, pulled off my regulator and slipped it in Lara's mouth. That's what double-o-seven always does when he's

trapped underwater with a busty blond and some KGB thug is trying to kill him. It seems to work.

A scuba regulator is a tricky device. You have to breath steadily. If you start huffing and puffing, the thing clams up and you suffocate. Lara was huffing and puffing. Panic was making her hyperventilate. Panic was trying to kill her.

I wrapped my legs around her waist, drawing her in tight and pulled her head close in to my chest and stroked the top of her head. It's hard to be soothing in a Scuba suit, but I tried. Gradually, Lara began to relax and soon I saw her taking in air.

Meanwhile, I was turning purple. I eased the regulator from her, took a few deep breaths and gave it back. We stayed there for three or four minutes, passing the mouthpiece back and forth, before I pointed upwards. Time to go home.

I had no idea how much air we had left (all calculations go out the window when you've got two divers on one tank), but we took our time surfacing. As we moved up I saw a deep red welt burned around Lara's right calf and I could figure out what happened.

I was stung by a jellyfish at the beach as boy and I still remember how I ran screaming up the sand bellowing for help, convinced that I was going to die. It's like being bitten by an entire squadron of wasps all at the same time. Lara must have been stung, thrown into a panic and caught her regulator hose on something sharp. The hose was cut cleanly near the tank valve. Her mouthpiece was long gone.

She recovered quickly enough once aboard the Chris Craft thanks to some nifty first aid by Sharkey plus the fact that she's pretty darned tough for a cute blond. I made some noises about giving up and about no amount of treasure being worth a life, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"I'll be fine," Lara said. "As long as you're around to save me."

"Well, you know ..." I muttered, lost for words and not having much experience in saving lives. "I didn't really."

"Oh, you did," Lara said, smiling. "I owe you big time. I have to find a way to repay you."

"Forget it," I said. "You don't need to do that."

"I was thinking, I might get out that black dress of mine."

"The black dress from the other night," I gulped. "The one you wore on NewsHound."

"Well, that was my idea," Lara said, with a huge grin. "But if you don't think ..."

"Now hang on a minute," I said. "Not so fast. That was a pretty daring rescue. Touch and go there, for a while. I think you owe me, little lady."

Nine days later, we found what we had come for. It was in the captain's cabin.

The skipper's cabin is at the stern of the ship on the gun deck, which, since the ship was upside down, meant it was directly underneath our entry hole, three decks down, near the sea bed. Ironically, Sharkey and I had been in the captain's quarters nailing down the yellow rope on our first day diving. If we'd stopped to look around we could have saved ourselves a lot of searching, not to mention Lara's brush with death. Instead, we searched half the ship before we found our sunken treasure.

Actually, Lara and Sharkey found it.

I was up in the Chris Craft puttering around, watching the Boxley Cove cop chopper frolicking about the sky and wondering what the heck it was up to. Lara and Sharkey had been in the water less than fifteen minutes and I wasn't expecting them back for another three-quarters of an hour. I made a sandwich, poured myself a glass of juice and sat down with my face to the sun. I hadn't taken a bite before I heard bubbles and splashing.

"What you got there, Rex?" Sharkey said, smiling like a kid with a new bike as he climbed aboard the boat.

"What?" I said, looking at my watch and wondering if I'd dozed off. "Ham and cheese on light rye. What the ..."

"Flip you for it."

"Sharkey?"

Sharkey flipped a coin high in the air, caught it with his upturned palm and slammed it down on the back of his left hand, keeping it covered.

"Heads or tails?" he said.

"If you want a sandwich, I'll ..."

"Come on, Rex," Sharkey said. "Heads or tails?"

"Heads."

Sharkey stepped in front of me, both arms forward, and pulled back his right hand. I couldn't tell if the coin was showing heads or tails. Outside of a book, I'd never seen one like it before. It was crudely made, almost rectangular but with the corners oddly clipped. It shone cleanly, but with dirt in the crevices, as if someone had rubbed it between his fingers. I didn't know quite what it was, but I sure as hell knew what it meant.

"Holy shit," I said, for want of anything better. "Holy shit."

"This, my friend," Sharkey said, flipping it again, "is a genuine, one-hundred percent authentic, four-hundred-year-old Spanish gold doubloon."

"Holy shit," I said.

"We found hundreds of them down there," Lara said. "They're all over the captain's cabin."

"Holy shit."

"I'll weigh it," Sharkey said. "But I'd say each one is about an ounce. That's three hundred dollars apiece, give or take a few bucks."

"Holy shit."

"Looks like we're rich," Sharkey said. "What do you say to that?"

"Holy shit."

#

It was all in the captain's cabin. From what we could tell, it looked as if the skipper had ordered his men to stack everything taken from the Santa Castillo against his forward bulkhead and then had the ship's carpenters wall it in, somewhat like a false bottom in a suitcase or a desk drawer.

It made sense, really. In 1622, the year the Santa Castillo went down and the Neptune's Grace sailed off with some part of her cargo, an ordinary working man would have had to work for twenty years to earn a single gold doubloon. If the captain hadn't done something to safeguard his booty, the crew would have looted every last coin by the time they reached England.

We could easily have missed the stuff altogether, but for the fact that the impact when the ship hit bottom had buckled most of the hastily constructed extra wall. By the time Lara and Sharkey arrived, most of the planking had either fallen away or could be easily removed with a few ax strokes.

And there were more than just doubloons down there. We found gold bars, each weighing about twenty-five pounds, and smaller coins in half, quarter and one-eighth ounce weights, most in gold but many in silver. There was a bit of jewelry, as well, but we had no idea what it was or how much it was worth.

I was all keen to start bringing the stuff up, but Sharkey had a better idea.

"We'll bring up one sample of each item, to weigh it," he said. "But we'll leave most of it down there until we're ready to haul away the entire lot."

The plan was to get everything out of the ship and loaded into canvas sacks which we'd stack on the sea bed near the wreck. Once we'd cleaned out the ship, we'd have some idea how much metal we had to deal with. If it was more than a couple of thousand pounds, and we hoped it was going to be, we'd likely need some sort of towed barge or even a larger boat.

"It's too risky to be bringing stuff up piecemeal," Sharkey said.

"All we need is some nosy jerk in a speedboat to go whizzing by when one of us is climbing on deck with a gold bar in our hands and we're blown. We'll stack it up all nice and neat down there. Then, when it's all out of the boat, we'll haul it up."

"Someone could see us then," Lara said.

"We'll do it at night," I said. "It'll reduce the risk."

"Good idea," Sharkey said. "I was going to suggest that. And if we do it all in one shot, even if somebody sees us, we'll be long gone by the time they can do anything about it."

You'd think we'd have been dancing about the deck or hugging each other or singing or some such thing, but we were surprisingly calm for three people who were about to become rich beyond all dreams. Still, there was a certain giddiness that crept into our movements and our voices. We were like three office workers who'd gone one glass of wine over the limit at lunch and were now trying hard to act sober in case the boss found out.

"Hey, what about a celebration dinner?" I said. "My treat. We could head back early, clean up and blow some of our new-found wealth at the Station House restaurant."

"Head back early!" Lara and Sharkey gasped in unison as they strapped on tanks and checked their gauges. "Are you nutty, Rex?"

"Well, I just thought ..."

But they were already in the water.

CHAPTER 14

Once we found our treasure, it wasn't all that hard to get it out. Sharkey Drysdale had an idea to fill a canvas bag then haul it up on a rope through three decks and out the hole we'd made in the hull, but it didn't work. The rope kept getting snagged, forcing us to swim down and untangle it. When one bag ripped open scattering silver coins all over the officer's wardroom, we abandoned the plan and simply took turns swimming down to the captain's cabin, filling a bag with as much as we could easily lift, carrying it out of the wreck and stacking it in larger bags nearby.

Since we had no further need to travel horizontally along the three decks, we removed the strobes and strung them on the rope leading straight down. With a blinking blue-white light every couple of feet it was all rather festive. It felt like Christmas - which, in a way, it was.

It took a couple of days easy diving to bring it all out. By the time we were done, it was clear the Santa Castillo had sunk fast, taking most of her forty-seven tons of treasure with her. The Neptune's Grace hadn't time to off-load much more than a small fraction before the

galleon fell beneath the waves and broke up. So much for Horace Barnaby and his "better part" and his "handsome share."

We ended up with thirty gold ingots weighing twenty-five pounds apiece, 1,500 one-ounce gold doubloons, 947 half-ounce, 320 quarter-ounce and 400 one-eighth ounce gold coins. As well, we retrieved 1,265 one-ounce silver coins and a small amount of mixed jewelry.

"So what's it all worth?" I asked, up on the Chris Craft where Sharkey was punching away on a calculator like a whirling dervish.

"Tough to say," Sharkey replied. "As antique coins, this stuff is worth whatever collectors will pay."

"What about the value in gold?" Lara Travis said. "Say we just melted it all down?"

"Well, gold is about three hundred dollars an ounce, more or less," he said. "So a twenty-five pound ingot, that's four hundred ounces. Say a hundred and twenty thousand each."

"Jeez," I said. "We've got what, twenty-five of them?"

"Thirty."

"Then the one-ounce gold coins add up to..." Sharkey punched some more on the little calculator. "Now, 947 half-ounce, plus 320 and then the ..." He muttered some more, but I didn't catch any of it. Finally, he looked up.

"I don't know what that jewelry is worth," he said. "It could be priceless; it could be junk. But everything else, if we just melt it down and sell it for its metal value, comes out to ..."

Sharkey looked at his calculator screen. Lara and I didn't breath at all, our eyes fixed like laser beams on Sharkey's five-dollar adding machine.

"What we've got," he said at last, "is worth somewhere in the ballpark of four-million, two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars."

"Man," Lara said, the first to speak after a long silence. "That's more than I make in a week."

It wasn't the best joke in the world. It wasn't even all that funny. But the three of us laughed like it was the most hilarious god-damned thing we'd ever heard in our lives.

#

Recovery day was a Wednesday. We left about eight in the evening and it was good and dark when we reached the dive site. The night was clear and warm with just the oddest hint of an occasional wind. I fancied I heard a humming sound and a gust of air every now and then and thought we might be in for some rain, but it must have been my mind playing tricks on me.

We didn't need a towed barge after all. Sharkey had calculated

the total weight of our gold and silver at about 960 pounds, about the weight of five big men. The Chris Craft weighed 12,000 pounds bone dry. Another half-ton wasn't going to hurt her.

"It's better if we can do it with just the boat," Sharkey said. "If we pull out with a barge in tow, somebody is going to ask questions."

"But won't all that weight damage the boat?" Lara asked.

"Maybe. Who cares?"

"Farley Morris, for one," she said. "It's his boat."

"Don't worry about Farley," I said. "If we wreck his boat, we'll just buy him another one. We're rich, remember."

"Of course," Lara answered. "I keep forgetting. It's going to take a while to get used to that."

"Personally," I said, "I hope I never get used to being rich. I want to be pleasantly surprised every time I open my wallet and find more than twenty bucks in there."

#

We found the wreck site easy enough, thanks to the GPS device and the fact that, by now, we could pretty much smell doubloons in the air. We were the dope-sniffing bloodhounds of the sunken treasure business. Our stash was right where we'd left it, in twenty canvas duffel bags about a hundred yards from the wreck.

Each bag weighed about fifty pounds and could be easily carried to the surface by one diver. I'd only bought ten bags initially and figured it was enough, but Sharkey had sent me back for more.

"It's not that heavy, Shark," I'd said. "If one diver can raise fifty pounds, two together can lift a hundred."

"I know," he said. "I'm not worried about the lifting. It's the bags. If we overload them, they can rip open."

"I didn't think of that," I said. "I'd hate to spend the next two weeks swimming around the bottom, picking up coins."

"You'd be lucky if you found more than a couple," Sharkey said. "It's sandy bottom around here. Coins would get buried in no time. That's why nobody is diving around the Santa Castillo any more, even though she went down with a fortune."

I remembered reading about the three attempts to salvage the Spanish galleon's precious cargo. All three had found it spread over too wide an area and too deeply buried to make it worthwhile. Each expedition had found a few small pieces, but none had even earned back its costs.

Compared with our previous exertions, hauling the stuff up to the surface was easy work. I busied my brain by trying to calculate how much each bag was worth. It's a testament to my pathetic math skills

that we'd brought up eighteen of the twenty bags before I'd figured out that each one held about two-hundred-and-twelve thousand bucks worth of precious metal.

On the first dive, we set up a mess of strobes near the bags. They gave off enough light that we were able to leave our high-powered dive lights behind. On the surface, we kept things as dark as possible, just the cabin lights plus a couple of double-A Mag Lites for local illumination. No sense putting on a show for the neighbors. Don't advertise what you're not selling, as my old Grandma used to say. (Actually, she used to say that when my trashy older sister tried to go to school in a shrink-wrapped mini skirt, fishnet stockings and bright red stilettos, but the point is the same.)

It had crossed my mind that Sharkey might try to cheat us out of our share. Someone had to stay in the boat at all times while the other two dived. It would be an easy matter just to weigh anchor and drive off.

After all we'd been through together, I hated myself for the thought. But, at the same time, I didn't want to take a chance with four-million dollars. I didn't say anything to Sharkey. No sense hurting his feelings (or, for that matter, putting ideas in his head), but when no one was looking I surreptitiously palmed the ignition key and shorted out the starter motor.

I reckon Sharkey must have had the same thoughts about me. Later in the evening, I discovered the fuel line crimped with a bulldog clip and a length of steel wire wrapped around the steering gear.

Suspicious little bugger, that Sharkey.

It was about two-thirty in the morning when we finished. I was in the boat. Lara had just brought up the last bag and Sharkey was in the water, taking one last look around before leaving Neptune's Grace for the last time.

I felt a gust of wind and heard a faint whup-whup sound.

"What the hell ...?"

The whup-whupping grew louder and louder until I felt like I was in one of those Vietnam War movies. I half expected to see Robert Duvall in a silly hat blathering on about the smell of napalm.

It was a black night with little moon and we couldn't see a damn thing. Lara and I looked in the direction of the noise. We heard a click like a car makes when there's not enough juice to turn over the starter then, with no warning, the biggest, roundest, whitest light I've ever seen in my life washed over the two of us like a tidal wave. I'd once turned on my dive light by accident when it was pointed at my eyes and I'd seen spots for hours. This was the same thing multiplied by a factor beyond any calculation.

Lara and I bent our heads down, covered our eyes with our palms

and peered out. We looked like a couple of country bumpkins in one of those cheesy sci-fi movies gasping in awe at a spaceship. Close encounters with Homer and Jethro.

"Looks like we've got company," Lara muttered, out the side of her mouth.

"Either that," I said, "or dawn has come very early this morning."

#

The bright light turned out to be a thirty-million candlepower NightSun searchlight mounted on a Bell 407 helicopter owned by the Boxley Cove Police Department. The chopper had been fitted with floats and settled on the water just off the Chris Craft's port beam.

"Don't move," said a serious voice over a loudspeaker. "Stay on deck and keep your hands visible."

What next? I thought. Driver's license and vehicle registration?

The passenger door opened and Police Chief Cyrus R. Flockett hopped out, shuffled along the flat top of the float and climbed aboard our boat. The other door opened and an unidentified figure wearing a BCPD Tactical Team uniform stepped out, holding some sort of automatic weapon which he kept pointed in our direction.

"Well howdy, Fowler," Flockett said. "Surprised to see me? And Officer Travis. Nice to see you're keeping busy on your days off. I like my officers to have outside interests."

"Fuck, Chief," I said. "There's nothing here that concerns you."

"I'll be the judge of that," he answered.

"For the millionth time, Flockett," I said. "When are you going to get it through your thick skull that I'm not a dope smuggler?"

"Did I say you were running dope?" Flockett asked with mock surprise. "I never said that. I know what you're doing. You're bringing up sunken Spanish treasure."

I was stunned. Of all the people to cotton on to what we were doing, Cyrus Flockett was the last person I expected to see. For want of something better to do, I tried bluffing.

"Where did you hear a story like that?" I said. "It's absurd."

"Nice try, but we've been watching you," He said. "Ever since one of my boys saw you coming out of Drysdale's place trying to act all casual, we've been on your tail. We checked out that place, full of books about Spanish galleons. I don't understand all that, but I didn't need to. You folks led me right to it."

"We didn't find anything," I said.

"What?"

"We've been diving, but we didn't find anything," I said. "It's all a myth. There is nothing down there."

"Give it up, Fowler," Flockett said, pointing towards his helicopter. "You ever see the inside of that chopper?"

"No."

"We got everything in that baby," he said. "We got stabilized binoculars, starlite scopes, FLIR."

"Fleer?"

"Forward Looking Infra-Red," he said. "Some kind of high-tech thing, works off your body heat. Lets you see in the fucking dark. Works real well. Good use of the department's money, I'd say. We've been up there watching you for weeks. We saw you come out here. We saw you diving. And we saw you bring up twenty bags full of something or other. Coulda sworn there were three of you, though."

"Nope," I said. "Just us."

"Doesn't fuckin' matter anyhow," Flockett said, pointing to the canvas bags stacked up about the Chris Craft's cabin. "This is what I'm after. What is it you found, anyway?" he said.

"Souvenirs," I said. "Pretty colored rocks. Seashells. You know."

"Yeah. I'll fucking bet," he said. "So you won't mind if I take it all off your hands. The Cyrus R. Flockett retirement fund is looking for contributions. I reckon this here will do just fine."

"Chief," Lara said. "Maybe we can make a deal."

"A deal?" he said, laughing. "Sure we can make a deal. Here's the deal. You two fuckheads get those things loaded all nice on my chopper and I won't have Bernie here shoot your God-damned heads off. How's that deal?"

"Listen, Flockett ..."

But Chief Flockett was through talking. He pulled his nine millimeter from its holster, chambered a round and waved it between Lara, me and the twenty bags of Spanish gold.

"Move!" he yelled. "Get that shit loaded and do it fast. I've got a plane waiting to take me to the Cayman Islands and I want to be there, on the beach, sipping dark rum by sun-up."

Lara and I just stood there. The whole thing seemed too overwhelming. We'd been through too much to turn everything over to a beer-bellied slob of a crooked cop. My brain raced, looking for a way out, and came up with nothing. Flockett wasn't impressed.

"Bernie," he yelled at his man on the chopper.

Bernie didn't say anything, but I heard the metallic click of a weapon being cocked and heard the crack of a single fired round. The slug tore into the boat's bulkhead not six inches from my right side. I grabbed a canvas bag and started clambering towards the BCPD helicopter. Lara, with another bag, did the same.

We moved a lot more slowly than we had too. I guess we both hoped something would happen to save us and the more time we gave

the cavalry to arrive the more likely they'd be to get here. We'd loaded about half the bags into the helicopter when I spotted an opportunity.

The left-over case of Patterson-Hewitt timed explosives was sitting against the forward bulkhead partially covered by Sharkey Drysdale's yellow wet-weather gear. A few canvas treasure bags had been tossed on top.

I glanced over at Chief Flockett but he seemed more interested in gawking at Lara's breasts than in keeping an eye on me. Bernie was still on the chopper's floats. He looked alert enough, but the NightSun had been switched off and there was plenty of light streaming out the helicopter's flight deck. I couldn't be sure, but odds were his night vision wasn't at its best.

I grabbed a nearby bag and tossed it over my back, obscuring the view while I dropped my left hand to another bag and slid back the zipper open about three or four inches. As I stood up, I lost my grip on the bag and dropped it to the deck. Flockett looked over and I shrugged and grinned like an idiot. As I picked up the bag with my left hand, my right slid over to the bomb case, grabbed one of the lethal metal cylinders and dropped it inside the bag I'd just opened.

When I returned from loading the first bag onto the helicopter, I picked up the case holding the bomb and walked back to the chopper. I walked along the float on the opposite side from Bernie and carefully placed the bag in the aircraft with the others. Working quickly, like a shoplifter at the jewelry counter, I shoved my hand in, gripped the bomb and drew the end out. I pulled off the plastic safety cap, twisted the circular ring, and dropped the entire thing back in the bag.

Sweat was pouring off my face and I turned around half expecting to find a machine gun stuck in my face. But no one had seen a thing. Bernie was well out of sight and Cyrus Flockett was still happily entranced by Lara's tits.

Within fifteen minutes we'd loaded the last of the bags on the police chopper and climbed back on the Chris Craft.

"All right," Flockett said. "Turn around."

We did and the chief, moving alarmingly fast for an out-of-shape guy, holstered his gun, pushed Lara to the deck, pulled my two arms together until my wrists were side-by-side and snapped on a pair of handcuffs. He brought up his left leg behind my two kneecaps, tapped gently and I was down too. He handcuffed Lara and ordered us to sit, back to back, on the cabin deck. Bernie tossed him a third set of cuffs and Flockett used them to secure the two of us to a metal deck cleat.

Flockett pointed his service automatic down at the hull in the helm area forward of where Lara and I were manacled and fired about ten quick rounds.

"Gonna sink real slow," he said. "But sink she will. It'll take you

two a long time to drown. Wish I could stick around and watch, but there's a fast plane with my name on it waiting to take off."

"I thought you said you weren't going to kill us if we loaded the chopper," I said, in a vain appeal to Flockett's minimal sense of decency.

"No," he said. "I said I wouldn't shoot you. Never said nothing about drowning. Don't let nobody ever say Cyrus Flockett don't keep his word."

#

With almost a thousand pounds extra weight aboard, the BCPD helicopter had a little trouble taking off. The pilot seemed to stoke up a good head of steam and the rotor blades were whirring faster than normal when the black beast lifted off the water, hung in the air for a second as if deciding whether to just say "fuck it" and drop back down, then began to climb.

"You wouldn't happen to have a hacksaw in your purse, would you?" I said, hauling in frustration at the cuffs.

"I've got a nail clipper," Lara said. "And a pack of gum."

"I can work with that," I said. "I used to watch MacGyver, you know. Where is your purse."

"On the far bunk. Under the pillow."

"That could be a problem."

The helicopter had moved away and was now difficult to see. We could still hear it, but the noise grew quieter with each minute. In the movies, they always show you the time-bomb's clock counting down, so you know when it's going to blow. In real life, if you can see the counter, you're way too close. When Flockett's chopper blew up, the burst came without warning.

We heard a loud "whoosh," like the last bit of a soda being sucked up a straw, followed by a white explosion that almost immediately turned to orange. It was oddly beautiful to look at.

Lara and I turned to each other and both tried to talk at the same time. Before we could figure ourselves out, there was another explosion. I thought it could have been a gas tank or something, but in sound and sight it was exactly like the first.

"I can't figure that," I said. "I booby-trapped the aircraft, but ..."

"You slipped one of the explosives aboard that chopper?" Lara said.

"Yes," I said. "I dropped one in the bags."

"Good idea."

"Thanks, but the second explosion ...?"

"I bombed the chopper too."

"Huh."

"I hid a delayed-action bomb on the helicopter, as well," Lara said.
"I guess sneaky minds think alike."

#

Cyrus R. Flockett was likely dead or getting there fast and the Spanish gold and silver was spread all over the ocean floor where nobody would ever get at it, but Lara Travis and I were still shackled to a sinking boat. It wasn't sinking fast. In fact, we couldn't yet see water, but the Chris Craft was lower in the water by a noticeable few inches.

Somebody's dive gear (mine, I think) lay a few feet away. I stretched out my arms, extended my body as far as it would go, thrust out my right leg and tried to snag one of the hoses with my foot. I was about ten inches short.

"What are you trying to do?" Lara asked.

"If I can get that over here," In said, "we can use that when the water gets too high."

"Which gives us what, another hour?"

"Another hour to make a plan," I said. "Besides, it's the only idea I've got right now."

I twisted my arms almost out of their sockets and got another few inches, but it wasn't enough. About to give up, I heard a familiar male voice.

"You'll never reach it, Rex," the voice said. "Better let me help you."

"Sharkey!" Lara and I cried, together. "Are we ever fucking happy to see you."

Sharkey had been in the water, about to surface when Flockett's floodlight had lit up the surface. Not knowing exactly what was happening, but pretty sure it wasn't good, he'd stayed below.

"I was getting worried about my air towards the end," Sharkey said. "I was right close to the surface and not moving around much. But I still wasn't sure it was going to last. I'm surprised to find you two alive. When I heard those shots, I thought you'd bought it."

We told him what had happen and Sharkey got to work firing up the main engine so he could start the bilge pump. There was more than a two feet of water in the boat by the time he was done. If we were lucky, the small pump would keep it from getting any higher.

"Now what about these cuffs?" I said.

Sharkey shook them around a bit, but he didn't seem to have an answer.

"I guess Flockett has the key." he said.

"Probably," I said, twisting round to talk to Lara. "But all cuff keys are the same, aren't they? Did you bring one?"

Lara hadn't brought a key, which wasn't a surprise as we weren't expecting to get handcuffed. But she knew enough about cuffs to tell Sharkey what to do.

"Who's got a ball point pen?" she said.

"There's a bunch in that little compartment next to the throttle," I said.

Sharkey grabbed a bundle and did exactly what Lara told him. He pulled the writing end out of all of them until he found one with a metal, rather than plastic, inner tube. He held the tube firm on a flat part of the deck and used the rounded barrel of another pen to press it flat. Ink oozed out the barrel and all over his fingers, but he wiped it up without complaint.

"There is a ratchet on each side of the handcuff, near the lock," Lara said. "Slide the pen barrel inside until it pushes down the ratchet."

Sharkey did and, after three or four attempts, was able to slip open the handcuff holding us to the deck. He repeated the drill on my cuffs and Lara's, but he had to wait a while to get started. Realizing we'd just escaped a slow and soggy death, Lara and I were bouncing up and down on the deck like a pair of giddy children.

The bilge pump held up long enough for us to get back to Boxley Cove, where we tied the Chris Craft tight to the pier and hoped Farley Morris wouldn't notice the seawater sloshing about inside.

The cops were at the pier. People all over town had called in after seeing the explosion. With Air One long overdue, the watch commander had put two and two together and mobilized every available unit. Lara flashed her badge at the two detectives and we fed them some line about a romantic cruise and an unexplained explosion over the horizon and they seemed to buy it.

#

Mere days after our little adventure ended, Lara Travis returned to patrol duties. Within a month she'd nabbed an escaped convict from the state penitentiary and won a commendation from the mayor for talking a gunman who'd taken a school full of kids hostage into giving up.

The Boxley Cove Police Department got a new Chief of Police. Winston Quigley, recently promoted from Deputy Chief, is every bit as incompetent as Flockett, though I hear he's a bit more honest. Lara says the new chief, who's never met me, never seen my boat and doesn't even know where I live, is convinced I'm a drug dealer.

With our four-million bucks pretty much lost forever, I'm back to scratching out a living as skipper and cruise director aboard NewsHound. It's still as financially precarious as it's always been, but the odd quickie private-eye job helps from time to time. But I'm not complaining. As I always say, the worst boat work is better than the best office job.

And it's not as if we got nothing out of the deal. A couple of weeks after things had quieted down, Lara and I were back on Farley's Chris Craft cleaning up, repairing broken equipment and patching bullet holes. I'd pulled out the bunk where we'd installed the side-scan sonar and was just about to re-install the cushion, when a spark of reflected light caught my eye. I reached for a small screwdriver and it took less than a minute to prise two doubloons free of their hiding place.

"How did they get there?" Lara asked, when I showed her what I'd found.

"Sharkey must have hid them," I answered, keeping one coin for myself and handing the other to Lara.

"Rex . . ."

"No, no," I said. "Fair's fair. We're a team."

Lara nodded and slipped the doubloon into her pocket.

"I don't know what you plan to do with yours," I said. "But I'm cashing mine in and putting a down payment on a new Gaggia machine. I've had enough of that old thing and I think we've earned a new one."

Lara thought for a second, reached into her pocket and handed me her coin. "Here," she said. "With the two coins, you'll have enough to buy one outright."

"All right," I said. "You just bought yourself the world's most expensive cup of coffee."

"Don't kid yourself, Fowler," Lara said. "I plan to be around for a lot more than just one cup."

#

We never saw Sharkey Drysdale again. He seemed to disappear seconds after we reached harbor. I keep hoping for a card or a phone call, but so far, nothing.

I did hear an encouraging lead from an old newspaper buddy of mine who lives down state. It seems people in Miami have been reporting stories of a con-man peddling some ludicrous tale about a Mafia don, a crooked police chief and a helicopter full of gold doubloons.

I would've checked it out, but it all sounds a bit far-fetched to me.

-END-

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